

THERE'S
NO WAY
A SIDE
CHARACTER LIKE
ME
COULD BE
POPULAR,
RIGHT?

2

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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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**"YOU'D BETTER BRACE
YOURSELF, SENPAI!"**



#DECLARATIONOFWAR



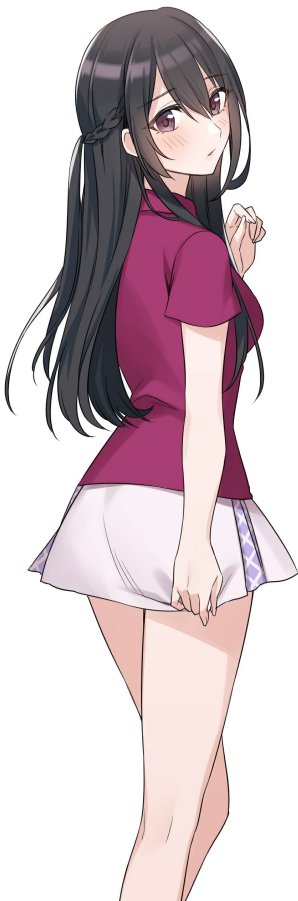
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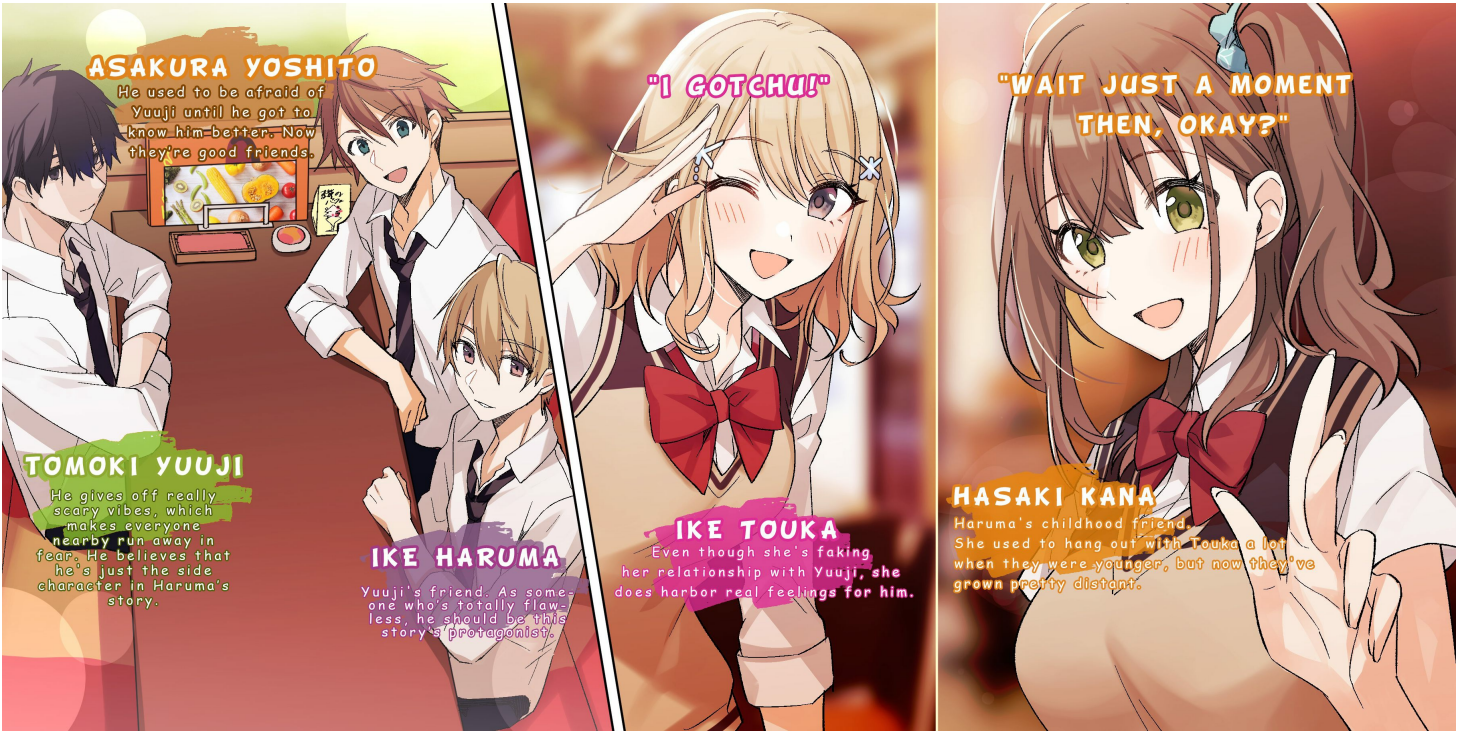


"WELL? WHAT DO
YOU THINK, SENPAI?"



"WHY DO I HAVE TO
WEAR THIS TOO...?"





ASAKURA YOSHITO

He used to be afraid of Yuuji until he got to know him better. Now they're good friends.

TOMOKI YUUJI

He gives off really scary vibes, which makes everyone nearby run away in fear. He believes that he's just the side character in Haruma's story.

IKE HARUMA

Yuuji's friend. As someone who's totally flawless, he should be this story's protagonist.

"I GOTCHU!"

IKE TOUKA

Even though she's faking her relationship with Yuuji, she does harbor real feelings for him.

"WAIT JUST A MOMENT THEN, OKAY?"

HASAKI KANA

Haruma's childhood friend. She used to hang out with Touka a lot when they were younger, but now they've grown pretty distant.

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Chapter 1: There's no way a Side Character like me could be popular, right?

My time in middle school wasn't the greatest. Actually, scratch that—I'd say my past 15 years on this earth have been pretty shitty.

People have always avoided me. I don't know whether it's out of fear, hatred, or something else. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say it's because of my looks. Apparently, I look like I'm constantly out for blood. Well, that's the story of my life summed up: people stay well out of my way, so I never had much chance for social interaction.

Ever since entering high school, though, things have definitely started to look up. Yeah, I'd say my life is pretty decent right now. Don't get me wrong—there are still swarms of people who basically shit their pants at the mere sight of me or immediately want to bash my face in. But at least now I can say there are also people who understand my situation.

Take one of my classmates, Asakura Yoshito, for example. We got to know each other at a school event. Although he was scared of me at first, we've ended up becoming buds. There's also Kai Rekka. Sure, I had to beat the shit out of him first, but he's been a good friend ever since. Next, we have Chiaki Makiri-Sensei. She's one of the few people who took a shine to me, and she's been on my side from the beginning. She's never really cared about how I looked. And let's not forget about Touka. We're faking a relationship right now, but she's really been a big help overall. Last, but not least, there's the real protagonist of this story—Ike Haruma, my best friend.

Thanks to them, I've been able to experience a fairly normal high school life

and live out my youth.

Well, there are still a fair amount of hurdles. I guess I should mention that there are a lot of people who doubt my innocence, as well as others who question the validity of my relationship with Touka.

One of those people happens to be Haruma's childhood friend, Hasaki Kana. She's basically the school's idol, and she's got a lot going for herself. She treats everyone equally and always talks to them with a smile on her face—everyone, of course, except for me. Let's not forget that she's a national contender in tennis and entered this prestigious school with the highest marks in the entire prefecture. Add her beauty, friendly personality, athleticism, and brains together, and you get a formula for one of the school's most popular girls. She constantly has guys chasing after her. Even I have to admit that she's pretty cute.

Everyone knows that she has a thing for Haruma, but that doesn't deter heaps of guys from confessing to her every week. Like, heaps and heaps. Tons.

Anyway, back on topic—she's someone who basically likes everybody, and everybody likes her in return. So knowing that she's not only so against my “relationship” with Touka, but also against me as a person makes me feel awful. She must really hate my guts.

Now just compare her, one of the school's idols, to me, the school's outcast. That's why I'm really optimistic about how things have turned out in the last few days and how they'll develop from here. I think it could be a great chance to overturn the status quo.



A few days ago, I found a letter inside my locker. It told me to meet them behind the gym building later that day, so I did. At first, I figured it was either some stupid punk trying to pick a fight, or someone ballsy enough to try and pull a prank on me. Still, in the back of my mind,

I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off about the whole thing. But

it wasn't until I saw the author of the letter that I was truly shocked.

"I'm really sorry to have you come all the way out here out of the blue."

It was Hasaki Kana who left the letter in my locker. What the hell was going on?

The scene totally looked like a love confession. As if that would ever happen, though, right? I reminded myself that I was the side character, so I needed to think rationally. Someone like me would never get a sudden confession.

We looked at each other silently. The only sounds around us were made by the whispering wind as it played with her hair. Her hair was tied into a cute side ponytail, and it fluttered in the breeze.

After what felt like an eternity of silence, she took a deep breath, steeled herself for what she wanted to say, and faced me head-on.

"I'm so sorry, but could we start as friends and see how things go from there?!"

...Wait, what? What the hell did she just say?

I completely forgot about the whole side character thing for a moment. Had I just been friendzoned without a proper confession first? Huh?

Chapter 2: The Promise

It's lunch break. I haven't seen any sign of Touka, so I'll ask Ike if he wants to eat together instead—never mind, here she comes.

“Hey there, Yuuji-senpai! Let's have lunch together!”

In case you've forgotten, Touka's supposedly my girlfriend. Believe me, she tries her hardest to make sure everyone and their mother knows it. Just to be clear, though, we're not actually dating. In truth, we're faking a relationship.

But yeah, back to reality—she enters my class shouting excitedly so that everybody's eyes are on us. I stare back at them, and they avert their gaze and go back to minding their own business. No matter how many times it happens, I still don't find their act funny. Sometimes I swear they're doing it on purpose, but who cares at this point. Maybe I should change up the routine a bit: I could hit them with a new reaction instead of glaring at them and see how they react. It's been a month already, and this whole shtick is way past its expiration date.

I stand up and head over to the entrance to meet her. As I do, I can sense someone else's eyes fixated on me; they belong to Hasaki Kana. She doesn't really buy our relationship, and she's pretty distrustful of me. I'd really like to have a one-on-one with her to try and clear things up, but I haven't gotten the chance yet.

“Come on, Senpai! You should be a little more lively when I come to see you! For starters, maybe don't walk around looking like your dog just died?”

Okay, mom. Sorry I'm not being enthusiastic enough. Jeez.

“Yeah, whatever. Usual place?” I answer, trying to move on.

She looks pissed for a second at my flippant response, but then blushes slightly at the mention of our “usual place”—the courtyard. Huh, that's weird.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

“Oh, no, I just... I'd really like for us to go to the roof today instead. Do you

mind?” she asks while averting her eyes.

She’s carrying a basket with her, so I can hazard a guess why she wants to go there.



We arrive at the roof. Normally, this place is off-limits to students, but Touka noticed a while ago that the door’s lock is broken. Because of that, we’ve come up here a handful of times already.

“Senpai, can you spread the sheet?”

I nod wordlessly, grab the folded sheet placed near the entrance, and lay it out on the ground. If I remember correctly, Touka brought it up here a few days ago. I know she’s very keen on adding more things to the setup up here, as well. She mentioned bringing up a table or something? I guess the rooftop will have a lot going for it in the near future.

We sit ourselves down on the sheet.

“Welp, Senpai—today’s your lucky day! I, your beloved girlfriend, have prepped lunch for you! No longer do you have to eat those nasty-ass cafeteria sandwiches that you always get. You happy?” she chirps. She retrieves a pair of lunch boxes from her basket and hands one to me.

I asked her a while back to make some food for me, so I figure that’s why we’re on the roof today. If we’d had this picnic in the courtyard, where everyone can see us, I can already imagine the sting from the daggers they’d be staring at me. Pretty much every other guy in school would be jealous of me.

“Thanks. And yeah, I’m quite happy about this.”

“O-Oh, really?! I gotta admit, you’re pretty cute when you’re being honest!” she says while looking away, her face tinged bright red.

“So you’re saying that since you made this, I can expect something better than

those ‘nasty-ass sandwiches?’”

Her cheeks puff at my remark.

“What?” I ask.

“I just wanna remind you that I didn’t make you lunch just ‘cause ‘you wanted some,’ okay?! I did it ‘cause, well...”

Yeah, yeah—because we’re “in a relationship.” I get it. Despite this not being real, I feel as if Touka and I have come to trust each other a lot. Maybe she made this for me today as a result of that friendship. Or maybe she felt the need to do it because of our situation. I’d like to think it’s the former, though—it makes me happier that way.

“Sure. Thanks anyway. I’m gonna dig in now, if you don’t mind,” I say as I open the lid of the box.

Inside is a variety of foods arranged neatly in a colorful spread. It looks rather appealing.

“Okay, Senpai, open your mouth!” Touka exclaims. She takes her chopsticks, plucks a piece of bacon-wrapped asparagus from the box, and presents it to me.

“Uh...You know you don’t have to feed me, right?”

“What’s wrong with you, Senpai? You never know if somebody is spying on us right now, y’know. We gotta play the part just to be safe!” she says with a smile.

“The hell are you talking abo—Mmph!”

She doesn’t even let me finish my sentence before stuffing the food into my mouth with a devilish grin. I wanna chew her out so bad, but the food’s actually pretty frickin’ good; I’m left chewing the food without a complaint instead. I savor the taste. Man, it’s tasty. What can I say?

“Sooo... how is it, Senpai?” she says with the same devilish grin.

“Pretty good,” I whisper.

“Nice,” she says with a sigh of relief.

Seeing her smile like that brightens my mood, and my annoyance totally dissipates. I completely forget about the fact that she almost made me choke. I

guess she notices me smiling back at her and finds it creepy, because hers instantly vanishes. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

I can’t tell her that her smile lifted my spirits. I gotta think of something else to say.

“Just don’t go suddenly shoving food in people’s mouths like that, please,” I answer as brusquely as possible.

“Oh, okay! I’ll be sure to let you know next time!” she replies. She picks up a piece of omelet from her box and pops it into her mouth.

Man, does that mean she’s planning on pulling that shit again? Ugh, whatever. Just smile and eat, Tomoki. Smile and eat.



We’ve finished eating, so now we’re sipping some tea and chatting while we wait for the break to be over. I suddenly recall Hasaki Kana’s stare back in class. Guess I can ask Touka about it.

“You and Hasaki have known each other for years now, right? You were basically friends or something at some point, if I remember correctly?”

Touka’s smile vanishes the moment she hears Kana’s name.

“Um, why are you even asking me about that?”

“I’m just curious about her.”

That murderous look she gave me the moment Touka stepped in and called my name flashes through my mind. I’d like her to acknowledge my relationship with Touka, considering she’s the one who’s the most adamant about it being “real.” I know the two of them don’t get along very well right now, but I want to know what they were like before. I’d be lying if I said I’m not curious about it.

“Oh, so you’re curious about it, huh? But, uh, d’you think it’s a good idea to, like, talk about other girls in front of your girlfriend? You sure are tactless when it comes to women, huh? How about, I dunno, not doing it at all?” she says.

She's got a poker face on, but her voice clearly indicates she's angry.

Man, and she was so happy until now. It's not teasing, either—she's definitely upset, and it's all my fault. I think back to that one time Kana and Ike joined us for lunch. Touka was pretty brutal toward her, but I never expected her to be such a sore topic for Touka even when she's not around.

"I'm sorry. I just want to understand why she won't accept our relationship; that's all. I only want to know what happened between the two of you that makes you act the way you do now. But if you don't wanna talk about it, let's just leave it here. I'm not going to force you to discuss it or anything," I try to softly explain.

"Oooh... So that's what you meant. Got it," she says with a sigh of relief. She definitely seems less pissed now.

"What did you think I meant?"

She lets out another sigh and relaxes her posture, but doesn't give me a response. Seriously? Now I'm the one who's getting pissed. Finally, she speaks up.

"I guess we got along pretty well up 'til a certain person graduated from middle school."

"Did something happen?"

"Yeah, let's just go with that. I feel like it was for a pretty stupid reason, though, so I don't really feel like talking about it," she mutters as she plays with her bangs.

"Okay. If that's the case, I won't pry any further," I reply.

"Thanks!" she exclaims with a smile.

It's a shame, but if Touka's not open to explaining everything, then it's not really my place to butt in. As if scripted, the bell rings with perfect timing.

"Let's get back to class."

"Yeah."

We stand, put the sheet back where it was, and head back inside. Right as

we're about to part ways, Touka turns around and tugs on one of my sleeves.

“Oh, right—I forgot to tell you something, Senpai!”

“What?”

“It just came to me, actually. You have tests next week, right?”

Now that she mentions it, yeah. The freshmen have their first round of tests coming up, just like we sophomores do.

“I guess so. And...?”

She looks confused by my reply, but it's quickly replaced by irritation. “What do you mean, ‘and’? We're gonna study for the midterms together, duh! Make sure to leave your schedule open!”

“Huh? But you're a first year. Study meets are meant for helping each other. How will ours be even remotely useful?”

“Well, you could help your cute little kouhai here with her studies!”

“Nah. You've got the top scores in your grade. Plus, that event the student council held a while back for the first years was plenty for you. Didn't you say that you could study on your own, anyway?”

A vein pops up on her forehead, and she loses her cool, “But aren't we, y'know, a couple and all that?!”

I wish I could roast her and retort with, “No we're fucking not!” But unfortunately, I can't, so I just nod silently instead.

“You know when couples have a ‘study meet’ together, they don't necessarily ‘study,’ right?”

“Okay, Socrates. Maybe chill with the cryptic bullshit and get to the point?” I snap. I legitimately don't get what she's getting at with all of this. She wants to set up a study meet where we don't study? What in the hell kind of idea is that?

She stares at me wordlessly. The awkward silence stretches on until I break it.

“Sigh... Okay, okay. I was gonna study at home alone anyway, so sure. I'll open up my schedule,” I mumble, and her face lights up.

“Nice! I can't wait! I'll fill you in on the details later, okay?!” she replies with a

happy tone. She finally leaves my side to return to class. Right before she goes through the door, though, she turns around again and waves at me.

How can she be so ecstatic about a study meet? I don't get it, and I can't help but feel like it's gonna be a total drag. Then again, I've never had the chance to experience this sort of thing before. So I guess I might actually be looking forward to it, as well. Man, I'm kinda embarrassed now.

Chapter 3: A Vertical Relationship

Classes are over for the day, so Touka and I meet up to walk home together. As per usual, I'm getting some curious glances and not-too-friendly looks from guys who're still butthurt about me being with Touka. I guess it's part of the package deal—Touka's looks, smarts, and friendly personality have ensured her a place at the top of the school's hierarchical pyramid. She's a celebrity, just like me; although you might say I'm known for all the wrong reasons. I'm pretty much Touka's complete opposite. I look terrifying and, to make matters worse, I've never really learned to hone my social skills. I mostly keep to myself, so I'm labeled the school's token "criminal." As a result, there are all sorts of rumors flying around about me.

I look over at Touka, trying to judge her reaction. I'm a little worried, not gonna lie; it wouldn't be the first time her mood has soured because of onlookers. But surprisingly enough, she looks as cheerful as ever. Actually, she looks a little too cheerful. Something's definitely off. Maybe she's already used to everyone fawning over her because of her massive popularity at school? As for me, I'm not sure if I'll ever get used to the legions of guys staring at me and whispering things like, "How dare you get so close to Ike."

"Hey, Boss! How was your day?!" a voice rings out behind us. I turn in the direction of the soccer field and see a guy with a shaved head approaching us. His name is Kai Rekka. You may remember him as that first year who's stuck by me ever since we duked it out over some, uh, "differences," let's say. We've been getting along well since then.

I stop and wait for him to catch up to us, but Touka doesn't seem too happy about that. "What are you standing around for, Senpai? Come on, let's go home

already,” she says with a poker face.

“Oh, come on—we can spare a moment to talk to him, right?” I ask.

“To be completely honest, I’d rather not,” she snaps back.

She’s furious at Kai; not that I can blame her. I can’t really argue about it either, mainly because she’s angry on my behalf. At one point in our fight, he’d pulled a knife on me. According to her, she can’t ever forgive him after that.

“Sup, Boss! Heading home?” Kai says, apparently blissfully unaware of Touka’s anger.

“Yep. Also, can you please call me Tomoki instead of ‘Boss?’”

“You got it, Boss!” he answers with a smile.

Unfortunately, his smile doesn’t mean shit—seems like my request went in one ear and out the other. It’s a nice smile, though. Even with his totally-shaved head, he’s still a good-looking guy all around.

“Crap, Tomoki’s making other first years call him ‘Boss?’”

“I feel bad for that guy. My heart goes out to him.”

“Didn’t he shave because of Tomoki, too?”

“Goddamn. I swear, man—Tomoki Yuuji’s the devil himself.”

Now everybody around us has started muttering about how much of a dastardly villain I am. Did they even hear what I just told Kai? Guess he’s not the only one with a hearing problem.

“You got a moment, Kai-kun?” Touka asks.

“Oh, right, I forgot you were here with Boss, Touka. Going home, too?” he answers.

Oh shit, looks like she’s gotten super pissed from everyone whispering about us. I can tell.

“So, like, don’t you ever realize that by calling Yuuji-senpai ‘Boss,’ you only make him look bad? Everyone already thinks he’s a wackjob. Seriously, can you wrap your head around that for, like, one second? I respect that you hold Senpai in high esteem. That’s not the issue here. You can respect him all you want, but

don't you dare keep fucking him over with that title crap, or I swear I won't let you two interact ever again."

Everyone falls completely silent after she finishes her heated lecture, Kai included. He looks around us, enraged after finally realizing that people have been talking shit about me, then hangs his head in shame. After a moment, he lifts his head again, looks me in the eyes, takes a deep breath, and says, "I'll be careful from now on. I apologize, Tomoki-senpai. And you too, Touka. My bad. I wouldn't have realized without you pointing it out. Thanks."

Before our "disagreement," Kai wouldn't have been able to process something like that. After our fight, however, he's been more open to taking advice, changing his attitude, and apologizing. I think it's a great thing, actually—it shows how much the guy's improving.

I look at Touka. She's standing stock still, but it's obvious she's frustrated by the whole situation. He must've put her in a tough spot thanks to his apology.; I notice her click her tongue in irritation.

"I do have one thing I'd like to ask for, though," Kai says, raising his head to look straight at me. I nod to let him know he can continue.

"Can I call you Boss whenever we're alone, Tomoki-senpai?" he whispers. He blushes and lowers his gaze bashfully.

Huh. And to think he wanted to literally kill me just a little while ago. Just look at him now. I feel like I'm his role model or something. Not gonna lie, it feels pretty good to be seen in that light.

"Sure, if you want to," I respond. His dejected look instantly vanishes, and he flashes me a bright smile.

"Nice! Thanks, Tomoki-senpai!"

"Don't mention it. Anyway, we're gonna head home now. You should get back on that soccer field and break a leg. You hear me?"

"Yep! Okay, guys, sorry for keeping you! Take care on the way back!" he answers. He bows and runs back to the training field. I think he's one of the first guys who's shown me that much respect.

I glance over at Touka to see how she's faring right now. "What's wrong?" she asks.

"Nothing," I reply. She notices me looking at her and averts her eyes.

I can't really tell her I'm happy that Kai looks up to me and idolizes me so much. If I do, it'll just ruin her mood for our walk home. She'll definitely hit back with something like, "You better not lump us together just 'cause we're your underclassmen!"

Touka glares at Kai's figure off in the distance and angrily mutters, "You think this is over, you bald-headed psycho bitch? Don't think I don't notice all those dirty looks you've been giving him. How dare you."

"Oh, come on. You're exaggerating. There's no way he's looking at me like that."

She doesn't reply with words, but she targets me with her murderous glare instead. In return, I look straight back at her without flinching. We stare at each other silently, albeit tensely, for a few moments. In the end, Touka's the one who breaks our little staring contest by blushing and lowering her eyes. She takes a deep breath, which seems to relieve her bad mood slightly, and says, "I guess I need to keep on my toes, anyways."

"You worry too much. Kai and I are never gonna go anywhere beyond just friends."

"Tomoki-kun, Ike-san... I know I'm barging in on your conversation, but do you mind if I talk to you? It's about Kai-kun," someone behind us voices.

Touka and I turn around. It's Chiaki Makiri-sensei. She's known as a really beautiful teacher at this school, but right now, her expression is stern and cold.

"He started it, not us," Touka quickly answers. She's slightly smiling, but she's clearly on high alert.



Makiri-sensei leads us to the student counseling room back at school. “Sit down, please,” she says coolly. She’s just as stony as ever.

Touka does as she’s told without a word, but I instead gaze over at Makiri-sensei. She’s one of the youngest and prettiest teachers at our school. She also happens to be strict with everyone, but she still has a sizable fanbase among the male students despite that.

“Sit down, Tomoki-kun,” she urges me. I place myself next to Touka; Makiri-sensei is seated on the opposite side. Although Touka is looking away, I stare right at her.

“Do you have any idea why I’ve called you here? It’s in regards to Kai-kun,” she starts.

“No, we don’t. We haven’t done anything wrong to him, so, like, I don’t even know why you felt the need to drag us all the way back here,” Touka retorts.

I have no idea how much of Touka’s attitude Makiri-sensei is willing to tolerate. I’ll just keep quiet and see how things play out.

“What about you, Tomoki-kun? Any clue?” she asks, turning her head toward me.

“I’m guessing it’s because of his recent changes or something?”

“That’s right. Something’s clearly changed with him ever since the Golden Week holiday started. One thing that’s obvious is his appearance, but he’s also begun to treat you differently.”

Touka sighs. I know full well that she’s not the type who takes well to getting preached at; even more so if Kai Rekka’s the subject.

“I’m not very familiar with him, but what I do know is that he’s the sort of guy who cares a lot about his appearance. I can’t imagine that he just decided to shave his head on a whim. I also know that he didn’t take kindly to you initially, but now he’s very friendly with you. Wouldn’t you also find that strange?”

Nah, it’s not really strange considering what happened. He shaved his head after he lost our fight, but people inevitably started spreading rumors that I’d turned him into my “lackey” or something and forced him to shave it. I assume

that's why she called us here.

There's no way Makiri-sensei seriously believes that, right? I figure that that nonsense has reached the teachers by now, so she must've heard them, as well. She likely decided to meddle and find out what's really going on. That way, she can defend me and avoid further issues from arising. Yeah, I'm sure that must be it. Her expression is rigid, but she's likely just worried about us. She's been looking out for me ever since I started attending this school, after all.

"Sorry, I can't really say why," I answer. I'd get in trouble if I told her the truth—that the two of us had a fight on the roof, and that he'd pulled a knife on me. Kai would get it way worse than me for bringing a weapon to school.

Like I said, Makiri-sensei is strict but fair. She also knows exactly when to apply the rules. We'd both get punished in this case. Still, I can't bring myself to lie to her. I'll just stay silent about it instead.

"I see," she whispers faintly while nodding. "Well, I know what happened, more or less. And believe me, something did occur between the two of you. Telling me that 'you did nothing wrong' while also telling me that 'you can't say what happened' sounds quite suspicious, but I suppose the outcome is fine. You and Kai-kun ended up becoming friends after... whatever it was. In any case, I can't really do anything for you guys now," she says with a deep sigh.

Nice. Looks like she was able to figure it out, and, to add the cherry on top, we're seemingly not getting punished either. I'm relieved, but Touka doesn't seem to feel the same way. If anything, she appears to be surprised.

"Huh? What're you even saying, Teach? Like, you're not gonna give us a giant lecture or anything?" she asks incredulously.

"Yeah. I know it seems irresponsible to brush this off without a clear grasp of what happened, but I'll believe you guys if you say you're innocent. I won't press Tomoki-kun if he doesn't want to talk about it, either. Kai-kun was smiling when he was talking with you two earlier, like it was water under the bridge for all of you. There have been a lot of complaints and inquiries swirling around, though, and I really want that to end," Sensei explains. Touka stays silent as she continues in a serious tone, "If—for some reason—I'm wrong, and there is something going on with the three of you... I'll consider it negligence on my

end, and I'll act accordingly."

I gulp and manage to get out, "It was resolved. You can trust us on this. I swear."

"Well, that's good to hear," she says with a sigh of relief. She quickly appends, "There's something else I'd like to say. I'm aware that you managed to solve this issue just fine on your own. But if you guys ever find yourselves in another predicament, please come ask me for advice first. Don't rush in and do anything rash."

I thought she wasn't mad at first, but I guess we're still in a bit of trouble because we didn't go to her for help. I'm kinda ashamed, but also glad that this won't escalate further.

"Got it," I say.

"Okay..." Touka wearily replies.

"Seems like I kept you two for quite a while. You can go home now. I apologize for bringing you two here. Be careful on your way home, okay? Goodbye," she says as she stands up. Her stern look has been replaced with a gentle smile.



"I knew that if I told her the truth, she would've understood our situation, but I never would've guessed that she'd be able to tell even without me saying anything."

Touka and I are heading toward the station now on our usual route home. She's walking next to me with her eyes focused on me while I talk. She hasn't said anything in a while, though, and her expression is rather sour.

"What?" I ask her.

"I think she's a good teacher, too. She knows when to lay down the law and when to be lenient. Plus, she believed in us, but..." she trails off. It's clear she's

uncertain about something.

“But?” I prod her.

“Don’t you ‘like her’ a little bit too much?!”

“I really respect her, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“That’s not what I meant. Actually, I think she trusts you a little bit too much, too,” she says unhappily.

Oh, wait... She’s probably asking me if I harbor romantic feelings for Makiri-sensei. I guess she’s thinking that if it gets out of hand, it could put our “relationship” in jeopardy? How’d she even get an idea like that? No chance in hell I’d be able to score with someone like Makiri-sensei. First of all, she’s my teacher. Second of all, she’s way older than I am. Touka has to realize that much, right? Yeah, I can’t imagine she’s that dumb. Honestly, I have no idea why she’s so angry at me right now. Maybe she’s just pissed because we got dragged to the counseling room to go through a lecture.

“How is that even a bad thing?” I ask.

Touka’s expression darkens, and she whispers, “Maybe it’s not a bad thing now, but one day... What if she sees me as a potential rival and tries to go for you?”

“Why would you even say that? She’s on our side, you know.” I answer, unable to look past her comment. Makiri-sensei supports our relationship; why would she try to sabotage it? Besides, she’s our teacher. Having her against us would be big trouble... like, big frickin’ trouble.

Touka doesn’t say anything; she just smacks my arm. Why does she feel the need to hit me? And why can’t I tell her to cut it out when she does? I mean, it’s not like it hurts when she does—if anything, it tickles. I just want her to stop.

Unfortunately, Touka doesn’t speak at all on our way to the station. She keeps randomly hitting my arm instead.

Chapter 4: The Confession

It's the next day, and I'm at school per usual. I open my locker to fetch some of my belongings, but I notice something that wasn't there before.

"The hell is this?"

There's a letter inside; I grab it and check both sides. It's completely blank. Well, since it's inside my locker, I can't assume it randomly ended up here by mistake. I'll just open it and see what it says.

"Meet me behind the gym during lunch break," it reads in surprisingly beautiful handwriting.

This has to be some kind of prank. This isn't my first time receiving an anonymous letter like this, but it always ends in me getting stood up when I go to the place the letters specify. So the sender wants me to meet them behind the gym, huh? Since this is obviously another one of those fake letters trying to trick me, I'll just ignore it. I stuff the letter inside my bag, put on my other pair of shoes, and head to class.

The moment I enter, the class chatter dies down. This only lasts a second or two, though—everyone returns to their respective discussions before I even reach my seat. Up until last year, the class would fall dead silent and remain that way until the teacher arrived. Thankfully, that isn't the case this year.

"Morning, Yuuji."

"Sup."

The guy over there who just greeted me with the brightest of smiles is Ike Haruma. He's good looking, athletic, academically brilliant, and incredibly

popular with both the students and the teachers here. To top it off, he's our student council president—he's the closest thing to a superhero we'll ever get. I consider him to be the obvious protagonist of this story. I mean, who else could it be? He's also one of the few friends I have. I think he's the only person my age who speaks to me directly.

“Morning, Tomoki.”

Whoops, scratch that. I forgot about my new friend for a moment. His name's Asakura Yoshito, a member of the volleyball club. We met not too long ago through an event organized by the student council. Although he was afraid of me just like everyone else at first, he got to know me a bit better. Now, I guess we're at a stage where he can talk to me as if I'm normal.

“Hey,” I answer.

“What's wrong, Yuuji? You don't look very cheerful today,” Haruma says.

How did he notice? Is it that obvious that I'm kinda down in the dumps?

“Seriously? He looks like he always does,” Asakura quickly replies.

Of course he'd notice first—Ike and I have known each other for a while now. Plus, he's very sharp in general.

“I guess I'm a little upset, yeah,” I mutter.

There are two reasons for my bad mood: first, there's the thing about the letter. Part of me wants to ignore it, but part of me is hoping that maybe—for once—it's not a joke. Second, someone's been glaring at me ever since I walked into class. That someone is none other than Hasaki Kana. She tends to have her eye on me whenever I'm in class, but today, it's more apparent that it usually is. I've never seen her so fixated on me before. It's kinda annoying.

I know that she doesn't like me very much, although she does kinda respect me in her own way. Still, it's not the most fun to be stared at like you're some museum exhibit.

“You found a letter inside your locker?” Ike suddenly inquires.

Without uttering a word, I retrieve the letter from my bag and hand it to him. Asakura looks over it, as well.

“No sender, huh? It just says to meet them there... Maybe it’s a prank?” he asks suspiciously.

“Yeah, I think so, too. I’m probably gonna ignore it,” I say.

“Yeah, man, don’t worry about it,” Ike assures me.

I gotta say, it’s really nice to be able to have a normal conversation like this with other people. Ike examines the letter again and seems to realize something.

“This handwriting...,” he whispers as he looks over to the other end of the class.

I follow his gaze and end up meeting Hasaki’s eyes. Huh? I look away, but was that really who he was staring at? He must’ve been looking at someone else, right?

“Uh... actually, Yuuji, I can’t really tell you who this is from, but I think you should actually take this one seriously,” he says.

Huh, weird of him to change his mind so quickly. Whoever the mystery writer is, he must appreciate them—he seems pleased now. I know Ike likes to help others, so I can only assume that the letter is genuine. He’s the protagonist of the story, in any case; if he says I should go, then I’ll do it.

“Sure, why not?” I say. Ike sighs in relief.

“You know who is this from?” Asakura asks.

“Yeah. It’s the real deal. The sender’s not someone who’d do something like that,” he replies.

“I mean, if you say so, Ike,” Asakura responds with a shrug. He doesn’t press the subject any further—that’s how much he trusts Ike.

The bell rings, and everyone takes their seat. Guess I’ll wait until lunch break.



Once the first period is over, I take my phone out and text Touka about my

plans.

“Sorry, but I’m going to be busy this afternoon. Eat with your friends or something,” I type. I go to put my phone back in my pocket, but Touka’s reply arrives immediately. She’s sent me another one of those hideous emojis. This time, it’s an angry red face with a small bubble that says “Huh?” It’s followed by a text: “Y would u do that? I wanted to have lunch w/u u no?”

I’m sorry that I have something else to do for once. I know she wants to use me so that guys will leave her alone and all, but come on, cut me some slack, will you? It’ll just be for a day. She’s super popular, so I’m sure there are a bunch of people who would love to eat with her. Plus, she really needs to make some friends in her class. Real friends. Then again, who am I to talk? I barely have any friends!

“Sorry,” I reply.

She instantly sends me another emoji. This time, the ugly little character is sad instead of angry.

Uh, how am I even supposed to respond to this? I wish she’d use words instead of emojis... Oh, wait, she’s writing something now.

“I’ll just wait on the roof k? Finish ur stuff quick & meet me when ur done!”

I’m happy that she’s so eager to be with me, at least.

“Ok,” I reply tersely. I don’t really think too much about it. I just want to end the conversation as quickly as possible. Anyway, I guess it’s time to head to the gym.

“Yuuji!” Ike calls out right before I leave the class. What’s wrong with him? He looks so apologetic right now, it’s a little ridiculous.

“I think everything’s gonna be okay, but just in case... If something bad happens, just gimme a call. Okay?” he says.

“Sure. Will do. Anyway, I’m off to see what’s it all about,” I answer.

“Sounds good,” he replies, sounding more confident than before.



“I’m really sorry to have you come all the way out here out of the blue.”

It turns out that Hasaki Kana was the one waiting for me behind the gym. She’s unusually serious right now, so I just nod to urge her to continue. Unfortunately, she falls silent.

Well, this is awkward. I think for a moment that this would be the prime location for a love confession if this were a romance book, but I’m totally overthinking it. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. The silent moment stretches for some time until she suddenly blurts out with a determined look on her face, “I’m so sorry, but could we start as friends and see how things go from there?!”

Wait, what? You’re kidding, right?

It was baffling enough that she was the one who wrote the letter, but I could’ve never imagined she did it so she could friendzone me without even confessing her love for me first.

I’m seriously confused. This is just about the last thing I was expecting.

“What?”

I remain silent, and Kana clenches her eyes shut and trembles slightly.

“Hasaki...”

“Y-Yes?” she manages to squeak out.

“Did you just friendzone me?”

“Huh?” she whispers, confused.

“What?” I ask, adding to the confusion.

Another awkward silence stretches between us. Once again, it’s Hasaki who breaks the ice. She shakes her head lightly and says, clearly puzzled,



“F-Friendzone you? Huh? You mean I did that to you, Tomoki-kun? I-I just meant to apologize for everything that’s happened between us. I did say we should try being friends, right?”

She seems to realize what she actually said as soon as she finishes speaking, though, because she starts to panic.

“Oh, wait... D-Did I actually just...? W-Wait, no way!” she flounders.

“Um, Hasaki?”

“No! I didn’t mean it like that! That’s not why I apologized! I just figured that since we haven’t been on the best of terms recently, I wanted to apologize for treating you so badly! A-And I...! A-Anyways! I don’t have the courage to reject a guy before he gets the chance to confess to me, okay?! So that’s totally not what I meant!” she shouts as tears well up in her eyes.

“Okay, now that the apology’s out of the way, what about the whole ‘Could we start as friends and see how things go from there’ part, then?”

“Oh, that. Uh, yeah, that’s pretty much what I said...” she mutters shakily.

“I don’t get why you’re so eager to be my friend in the first place.”

Her eyes dampen even further at my comment. I guarantee she has no argument to counter me on that front.

“I-I’ve always wanted to be your friend.”

“Yeah, sorry, but I’m not buying that. Every time we meet, your face always goes bright red, and you glare at me. It’s pretty obvious that you’re not the biggest fan of me,” I retort.

Her face reddens just like I’d pointed out. I guess calling her out like that was too embarrassing for her to handle.

“Wh-What?! You noticed that?! I-I just...! I never, um, looked at you in a bad way! Yeah, it’s true I get red as a tomato every time I see you, but still!” she stammers while fidgeting.

“Why would you look at me so much, then?”

“That’s because... Well, I...”

She's at a loss for words. After yet another awkward period of silence, she all of a sudden gains steam and spits out, "I look at you because... because it embarrasses me! I've never seen a guy as handsome as you before, Tomoki-kun!"

...Wait, what the fuck? Did I hear that correctly? Is she lying? Maybe it's some kind of prank? If it is, I ain't fucking laughing! How could she find me attractive? I'm the school's so-called criminal! I thought guys like Ike would be her type.

Yeah, that's it—she has to be lying. But say she is, what is she after? The only thing I can think of is using me to somehow get closer to Touka. I am her "boyfriend," after all. She looks pretty damn uneasy right now, and it's no wonder. I'm onto her; I won't buy her lies.

"Tell me something, Hasaki—did you ever manage to make peace with Touka?"

Her expression sours the moment I mention Touka, and she looks away.

"Not since that one time we were all together and I apologized. I haven't gotten the chance to talk to her after that..." she says, forcing a smile.

Oh, I get it now. I see why she wants to be my friend. All of this is a sham. She's even willing to lie through her teeth to get what she wants. And what does she want, exactly? Definitely not my friendship, that's for sure. What I am sure about is that she wants to use me to attain her goal... whatever that is.

"Why would you ask me about her, though?" she inquires, still looking pretty on-edge.

Her objective is clear as day. She wants to befriend Touka again, and she's willing to use me as a stepping stone to achieve that.

"Oh, I know!" she suddenly shouts, interrupting my train of thought. "You don't have to do this. I mean, only if you're okay with it, but..."

She's got the whole air-headed cutie look going for her on the outside, but who would've thought that she'd secretly be so cunning and devious?

"I'd like it if I was not only your friend, but Touka's as well. If you could help us get along again, I'd be super happy! Only if you're fine with it, though!" she shouts while looking me straight in the eyes. She's more resolute than I've ever

seen her. She eventually falters and takes my silence as a no.

“I-I knew you wouldn’t be up for it... right?” she speaks hesitantly.

I’m mulling over my answer right now. What kind of relationship did they have in the past? Touka mentioned that they got along well up until “a certain person” went to middle school. Now I’m very curious to hear Hasaki’s point of view.

“Did you two get along well before?” I ask.

She answers with a sad expression, “Mhm. Our houses are close, so we hung out a lot back in the day. I’ve always gotten along well with Haruma, but Touka and I are... well, we’re girls after all, right? So we got along especially well. We used to be like sisters, you know?”

At the mention of them being close to sisters, her expression changes, and she grins widely. Damn, that’s how close they were? Who could’ve guessed Touka had someone she’d call “Big Sis?” Maybe I just don’t have much of an imagination, but I can’t picture Touka acting all cutesy and sweet like that.

“Well, up until I got into middle school, anyway,” she says grimly. Up until a moment ago, she seemed so happy. Looks like her story is pretty similar to Touka’s.

“Did something happen that made you two grow apart?”

She hesitates for a moment before answering. “Did Touka-chan say something?” she asks.

“All she told me is that you two had a good relationship in the past. Nothing else,” I answer.

“If that’s the case, I won’t say anything either. I hope you don’t mind. If she didn’t tell you, then I don’t really feel comfortable talking about it, either. I know I’m asking you for a big favor, and I’m being unfair by not telling you the whole situation, but...”

“I mean, if you don’t wanna go deeper into it, then don’t. Don’t sweat it.”

“...Okay, thanks,” she says with a slight smile.

Huh, the two of them reacted in pretty much the same way on this topic.

“Let me ask you one thing, though—I know you’re doing this so you can get along with her again. I get that. But why haven’t you tried yourself yet?”

“I’ve always wanted to make things right between us, but every time I’ve tried to come up with a way for us to get along again, I draw a blank. I’ve thought about getting Haruma involved, but I didn’t go with it in the end. He and Touka-chan don’t get along very well, so it’s for the best this way.”

They’ve got quite the tangled web of relationships, the three of them. So it looks as though she basically wants to do something about it, but she can’t come up with anything, and that’s been the status quo for years now. In the end, Hasaki hasn’t been able to do anything.

But there’s one factor that’s been added ever since Touka entered high school—me. Maybe she doesn’t want to involve Ike, but I’m Touka’s boyfriend. Things could go differently with me. I guess that’s what she’s shooting for?

I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I’m not actually Touka’s boyfriend, even if she thinks otherwise. I’m aware that Touka and I have a trusting relationship, but even that has its limit. I don’t think that either of us trusts each other completely, and rightly so.

Well, it’s not like she’s looking to achieve the impossible. There should be a way to do it. That’s what I think, at least.

“Okay, Hasaki. I’ll help you out,” I say.

After listening to both sides of the story, I’ve made up my mind. I remember how Touka smiled, even if just slightly, back when she told me about it. I think that possibly, deep down, she truly wants to mend things with Hasaki, as well. Maybe I shouldn’t butt into their lives. I mean, it’s really none of my business. But if I can do anything to help them get along again, to have them return to the days where they treated each other as if they were sisters, then I’ll take my chances and insert myself into this mess.

“F-For real?!” Kana shouts excitedly, a beaming smile alongside it.

“Yeah, for real,” I answer with a nod. “I’d like Touka to be happy, too, you know?”

Honestly, she and Hasaki are pretty similar when it comes to expressing their

range of emotions. Hasaki looks perplexed.

“What?” I ask.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just the way you said that sounded suuuper suspicious,” she says with a piercing glare.

Man, is she really okay with me? She did say she doesn’t hate me, but what’s up with that look? It only makes me doubt that she does, in fact, want to be my friend. It’s funny how she’s willing to use someone she hates just to become friends with someone who currently hates her. She must really love Touka, huh?

“Anyways, I guess now we’re friends, right? I hope we get along, Tomoki-kun.”

“Sure, same here.”

She pulls out her phone the moment I finish my sentence.

“Huh?” I blurt out. She’s looking at her messaging app. What the hell is she doing?

“Uh... Oh, right! Let’s exchange phone numbers! There’s a ton of stuff I need to ask you about!” she exclaims.

“Oh, so that’s why you took it out. Sure.” I pull my phone out as well, and we exchange numbers. By the way, it’s important to note that this is my first time swapping numbers with a girl my age.

“Aaand done. I’ll send you some texts later, so be sure to answer them. Don’t just leave me on read, okay?” she says while continuing to fiddle with her phone.

She doesn’t look very enthused about all of this, though, so I’m not exactly happy either. What’s going on? Does she really want to stay in contact with me? Her current expression tells me the complete opposite, but still...

“Sure, I’ll answer the moment you message me,” I answer.

“Sounds good!” she says and sighs in relief.

Oh well, whatever. In any case, Hasaki and I are now “friends,” I guess, even if it’s merely for the sake of helping each other obtain our own goals.

Chapter 5: Hearts Racing

Once my conversation with Kana behind the gym ends, I head straight for the rooftop. The first thing I see is Touka sitting on the sheet and fiddling with her phone. She's clearly bored out of her mind.

"Yo. Sorry for making you wait."

She turns around, and the instant our eyes meet, a bright smile washes over her face. Her happiness only lasts for a second before it's replaced by anger.

"You're late, dude!" she shouts. She makes some room on the sheet and taps the empty spot with her hand, signaling for me to sit down. Oh, well—I'll just smile and do as I'm told.

"I've been holding off on eating 'til you got here, so I'm starving right now. Let's dig in already!" she exclaims as she takes out her lunch. Today, she's having a mixed sandwich set.

"You waited for me? You could've just eaten without me if you were that hungry."

"Well, actually... Apparently, eating alone puts on more calories than eating with someone else. I read it on a website. That's why I held out for you."

"Yeah, right. How can you say that when all you ever eat is a measly sandwich set? That's barely enough to get by."

I think I've seen that article before, actually. Something about how you end up choosing healthier foods and eating better when you're with other people. I guess it's more of a psychological thing.

But honestly, considering her dietary choices and the fact that she rations and

plans her food ahead of time, she shouldn't have any worries about extra calories popping up. I'm pretty sure she knows that already, so I point it out.

"Oh, just shut up already!" she snaps. Her face is beet red. She looks away and starts chomping away at her food.

I bought some snacks from the cafeteria earlier; I take those out of my pocket and start snacking alongside her. As soon as I finish my food, Touka breaks the ice.

"So what was that thing you had to do today, by the way? Did someone ask you to help out or something?" she asks. She's moved on to her tea, which she sips through a straw.

"Nah. Kana had something she wanted to discuss with me."

"Oh," she says curtly. It's obviously an automatic response she blurted out without much thought. After a few seconds, the meaning of the words finally appears to dawn on her. She whirls around to me, surprised, and cries out, "Wait, what?! Why'd she wanna talk with you of all people?!"

I know she doesn't like her, but I figure she's a bit concerned about the whole ordeal. Maybe I should explain the situation to her? Then again, maybe not—the whole reason she wanted to talk to me in the first place was so that we could find a way for them to be friends again. Hm, what should I say here...?

"Did she have something... 'important' to tell you?" she mutters, her temper gradually flaring up.

"Yeah," I answer with a small nod.

I mean, Hasaki opened up to me and told me that she wanted her and Touka to be friends again. I'd consider that important.

"What did you tell her?" she replies, looking incredibly downtrodden. What the hell's wrong with her? Why's she so tense?

"I said sure, I'd do it."

Touka's eyes snap open, and she springs to her feet. She looks pretty upset by my answer.

"S-Senpai! You told her you'd go out with her?! Even when you know full well

I'm your girlfriend?!" she shouts, her voice trembling.

"Huh? No. Why would you assume that? We're not going out or anything like that," I answer quickly. What the hell's up with her?

"O-Oh! So she didn't confess to you or anything like that, right? Right."

Oh, okay, now I get it. That's what she meant by an important conversation. If I'd have accepted the other girl's confession, our "relationship" would've been pretty much dead and buried. That's why she blew her top like that.

"Yeah, of course not. Why would she even confess to me, anyway? Every time she sees me, she practically shits her pants. Well, her and everyone else around here."

It's sad to admit it, but I'm not really boyfriend material. Touka still looks to be in shock, though. For some reason, my words don't calm her down—in fact, it seems more like she's about to double down on me.

"Okay, maybe this time I just misunderstood, but what if it actually happened? What if someone seriously confessed their feelings for you, Senpai? What would you do then?" she asks worriedly.

"I don't think that's something I'm even allowed to think about. I can't fathom that ever happening to me."

"Well, just use your imagination for a second, okay?!" she quickly snaps back.

I mean, even just thinking about it is agonizing. The more unrealistic a situation is, the more painful it is to realize that the little scenario in your head is just pure fantasy. She definitely seems serious about it, though, so I'll give it a try for her sake.

"I... I can't really say, to be honest. It'd have to happen to me first before I'd know how I'd react."

That's the only thing I can lamely come up with. Sorry, but I've never given the subject much thought.

"You're an idiot, Senpai," she whispers.

"I mean... I'm sorry I didn't tell you that I'd definitely reject any confession outright, I guess."

“That’s not it, okay? God, I swear.”

“So what is it, then?”

“...Me realizing I’m the bigger dumbass out of the two people here, that’s what!” she snaps, her face red as a tomato.

This is where I’d normally crack a joke to lighten the mood, but she looks like she’s on the verge of crying right now. I should probably refrain from joking around. Can’t help but wish I knew why she went ballistic just now, though.



We finish lunch. Thankfully, Touka’s calmed down after her mysterious fit. She turns to me and says, “Oh, right—getting back on topic, though...”

“Is it about you being the bigger dumbass again, or...?”

“Are you seriously trying to piss me off right now? Because I’m not joking when I say that I’m in a bad mood at the moment. Maybe you should can it with your shitty jokes.”

She’s smiling, but I catch her trembling fist curling up out of the corner of my eye. Damn, she’s not kidding. I didn’t think she was still that mad... I’ll just shut up.

“It’s not that, okay? It’s about you talking about how scary you are,” she says.

“Oh, that? You could’ve just said so,” I answer.

“Seriously, shut up. Anyways, how’d you get that scar? If you don’t wanna talk about it, you don’t have to, though,” she says.

“Oh, right... my scar,” I say while tracing the scar under my eye. It doesn’t hurt anymore in the physical sense, but emotionally, it still hurts whenever it comes to mind. “I got it in a fight years ago,” I finally answer.

She looks at me with some suspicion and asks, “A fight? Like, a normal fight between you and some other guy, or...?”

“Yeah—” I respond, but quickly stop. I think it’d be better if I rephrase it. “That’s not quite it. I got it from protecting a friend.”

“So you got it from defending a buddy of yours?” she asks.

“Yeah. I wouldn’t blame you if you thought Ike’s the only friend I’ve had so far. As a matter of fact, there was someone else when I was younger. That was way before I met Ike. But he’s never reached out since that happened, so yeah...” I answer gloomily.

“Not gonna lie, I’m interested in finding out about this ‘first friend’ of yours,” she says.

Is this really that interesting to her? Now that I think about it, isn’t our break time almost over? Lemme check my watch real quick... Yeah, it’s pretty much about to end.

“I’ll tell you about him another day when we have more time... if you’re still interested in knowing, that is. Anyway, long story short—I pretty much received this scar protecting my friend.”

“Hm...,” she muses. She slowly approaches me and stretches her arms out toward my face. Taking one of her hands, she gently caresses my scar. The moment she touches it, I can feel her silky skin. The sensation’s foreign to me, so I flinch instinctively. My sudden movement makes her recoil a bit, as well.

“Ah, I’m sorry about that,” I say. She places her hand down and smiles. “What’s even got you smiling?” I ask. Was it that enjoyable to make me flinch like that?

“I mean, how can I not be happy knowing that you got that by protecting someone else? You’re a great person, Senpai,” she answers with the same smile and looks kindly into my eyes.

Damn, she’s being more straightforward than usual. I should say something in return, right? But what do I say? My mind’s drawing a blank.

“What do you even mean by that?” I finally manage to utter a half-baked response.

She grins, but doesn’t reply. At that exact moment, the bell rings.

“We should return to class,” I point out.

We gather the trash lying around and return the sheet back to its place. Touka seems a little dispirited, for some reason.

“I would’ve liked it if we could’ve stayed here a little longer, but oh well,” she sighs.

Yeah, so you could continue teasing me. Haven’t you ever heard the saying, “patience is a virtue,” Touka? I don’t wanna be an asshole, though, so I just keep my mouth shut.



It’s the next day, and I’m heading to school as usual. Actually, the walk there turns out to be anything but normal, because someone greets me from behind.

“Good morning, Tomoki-kun!”

I turn around to see who it is. It’s Hasaki, and she’s wearing a big smile on her face.

“Hey,” I return.

“All I get is a ‘hey?’ Isn’t that greeting kinda cold? I mean, I managed to gather enough courage to say hi to you. The least you could do is look happy to see me. My heart’s seriously running a mile a minute, okay?!” she says with a forced smile.

I know that friendly, easygoing nature of hers is the reason she gets along so well with everyone in class. It’s not just our classmates, either—she acts like this with everyone she knows. But why’s she going out of her way to be so friendly with me? What’s she planning? At least, those were my suspicions initially. Now, I know that she’s only doing it to get closer to Touka. It would make sense that she’s trying to suck up to me and win me over in the process.

Suddenly, another girl jumps in between us and quickly grabs my hand.

“What’s up, Senpai? You two looked like you were having a nice conversation.

Hope you don't mind if I butt in!" Touka chirps. She's smiling, but it's forced and stiff. There's a murderous aura swirling all around her. She turns to Hasaki and asks in the same tone, "What exactly did you mean by that, Hasaki-senpai? C'mon, tell me!"

"Oh, Touka-chan. Um, good morning!" Hasaki says awkwardly. Touka's sudden appearance has clearly left her at a loss for words.

"Good morning. Sooo... Like I said, I was just wondering what kinda topic would get your heart racing so early in the morning. Must be something really juicy, huh, Hasaki-senpai?" Touka doubles down. Hasaki starts to lose her composure, and her eyes get misty.

Touka's definitely misunderstanding Kana's feelings. She must see her as a threat to our "relationship." That's the only explanation I can think of right now; why else would she act so aggressively toward her? Come on, it's pretty obvious just by looking at her that she was near petrified while talking with me. There's no reason to be mean to her.

Then again, Hasaki can't exactly tell Touka that her heart's racing because she's scared of me. She wouldn't want to talk shit about me to my girlfriend. She's been put in a pretty tough situation here. It's all pretty simple for me because I know the full picture, but the girls don't. It's a shame, but I guess weird situations like these are bound to happen. It's up to me to smooth things out and help Hasaki.

"Oooh, looks like we got a catfight," a passerby suddenly says.

"Huh? Tomoki's two-timing or something?"

"As if. Kana-chan likes Haruma-kun. No chance in hell he's dating her."

"Maybe he's blackmailing the two of them? You know, to start his own little harem."

"It sounds so fucking plausible that I'm actually scared just thinking about it."

"So having Haruma-kun's little sister wasn't good enough for him, huh? Now he needs to steal Haruma-kun's childhood friend. too? Honestly, man, that guy's taking things way too far."

Listening to the others spew all this bullshit about me still cuts deep. How far up their own asses did they have to search to reach those conclusions?! I swear it's just because of how I look and nothing else. I've had enough of it.

I glare at the hecklers and try to think of a comeback.

"He's looking our way!"

"Run! Run for your lives!"

"God, he legit looks like he wants to kill us! Like, even more than usual!"

Everyone just ends up running away instead, screaming as if their lives were on the line. You'd think I was the one bullying them...

"There you go again, Senpai," Touka says while patting me on the shoulder.

"What the hell are you even implying?! I didn't do anything," I reply with a deep sigh.

"Oh well. Looks like those annoying pests are gone now, so we can talk normally. Anyways, back on topic,... What did you mean about your heart racing, Hasaki-senpai?" she asks Hasaki, staring daggers at her.

Hasaki looks like she's on the brink of tears. "I... I've never talked to Tomoki-kun before, so I'm somewhat nervous," she stutters.

"You're lying. You've never been the kind of person who gets nervous from talking to people, not even with strangers."

Oh crap, Kana's about to lose it. I have to jump in and help before Touka goes for the kill.

"Of course she'd be nervous about talking with someone as frightening as me," I say. There—now Hasaki has an excuse.

"Really? You don't look that scary to me," Hasaki replies with a puzzled tilt of her head.

Uh, okay, Hasaki. You just dug your own grave.

I give her a silent glance and manage to catch her attention. But instead of returning my stare, her face flushes red, and she stares at the ground. Fortunately, she quickly raises her head and looks resolute. I guess she noticed I

was trying to help her and has managed to come up with a rebuttal.

“I-I’m nervous because I’ve never talked to someone as attractive as Tomoki-kun!” she shouts in desperation.

“Damn, talk about shit taste,” Touka spits while recoiling from her.

I know she’s fond of saying stuff like that, but isn’t she supposed to be my girlfriend? She’s the one who’s always going on about how we need to keep this act up. How will Hasaki react to what Touka just said?

“Huh? I’ve actually been pretty jealous of you, Touka. You know your boyfriend’s pretty attractive, right?”

Oh, looks like Hasaki didn’t take her too seriously. Actually, now that I think about it, couples do tend to poke fun at each other pretty often. Hasaki must’ve just brushed her comment aside as typical playful banter. I shouldn’t doubt Hasaki too much. Man, I must be super paranoid—I doubt she’s that distrustful of our relationship.

Touka answers with a shrug, “It’s not like I’m with Senpai because of his looks, to be honest.”

Should’ve known that Touka would pick up on the situation and capitalize on it. Well, she is quite the social butterfly. Ah, the advantages of being outgoing. I’m glad she went with the flow.

“I admit that Senpai does have a strong look. And he’s cute, but kinda in an eerie way. You feel me? But you definitely can’t call him ‘handsome’... like a normal type of handsome, I mean. Maybe he is, but like, in a savage way?”

Okay, now she’s taking it too far.

“I-I guess,” Hasaki falters. “I think you two make a good couple. I don’t want to get in between the two of you, so don’t worry. Okay?”

Hasaki’s clearly having a bad time. I feel for her.

“How can I not be worried, though? Oh well. Yuuji-senpai loves me sooo much that I doubt he’d cheat on me, anyways... Right?” she finishes while looking straight at me with a sneering grin.

“I guess,” I answer with a shrug.

“There you go again, sounding like your dog just went through a woodchipper. C’mon, how about a little passion?!” she goads.

I bet she’s having the time of her life ribbing me like this. You piece of—

“Yeah, I’m actually head over heels for her, so don’t expect me to ever cheat,” I say reluctantly.

Now she’ll laugh and tease me for saying that corny shit. Yep. Any second now...

Touka moves behind me, grips my shirt, and presses her face against my back.

“What?” I ask.

“It’s nothing, okay?! I just can’t look at your face right now, alright?!” she shouts from behind me. What did I do now? I guess I must’ve laid it on too thick, and now she’s cringing at me. Can’t wait for this to pop back into my head as I’m trying to fall asleep tonight. There goes 2 hours agonizing over my mistakes.

Hasaki looks pensive as she scrutinizes both of us. Finally, she says in just about the sweetest voice possible, “She truly does love you, Tomoki-kun.”

I’m pretty sure that she feels my struggle right now; she can probably see Touka laughing her ass off behind me. That must be why she looks so grim. Well, jokes on you, Touka—I know exactly what you’re up to.

Chapter 6: An Old Friend

And so another boring set of classes have come to an end. I'm so glad this one is over; I was this close to dozing off for a moment there. Our next class is chemistry, so we need to head to the lab.

We're supposed to pair up with other people for the lab work. Everyone's gonna end up pairing up with their buddies. Asakura will choose a friend from the volley club, and it looks like Ike has his hands full with something else. He stormed out of the classroom as soon as class ended and doesn't look to be returning any time soon.

So I'll be left alone without a partner again. Ah, the classic.

I don't want to head over right away. If I go now, I'll be right behind everyone else in class. They'll only get paranoid that I'm tailing them. Yeah, I'll just keep an eye on the clock and wait here for a bit bef—

"We have chemistry class next, right? We gotta go now, or we'll be late," Hasaki says as she approaches my seat. She's the only other person left in class. It's pretty unusual for her to wait this long before heading to the next class. Why's she acting so differently today?

"Yeah, I'll be there in a bit. Why'd you stay here if you don't wanna be late, anyway?"

"Huh? I wanted to go with you, so..." she says as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

"What? Why do you want to go with me? Don't you always walk there with Ike or your other friends?"

She looks puzzled by my comment and says, “I mean... aren’t we friends?”

“...Right.”

Man, she hit me right where it hurts. We’re technically friends now. How am I supposed to respond after that?

“Come on, then! Let’s get going!” she says with a bright smile.

I nod, stand up, and depart with her.



On our way to the lab, we end up talking. “How was your first year, Tomokikun? All I know is that you spent a lot of time by yourself,” she asks.

“Yeah. I guess that whenever I wasn’t with Ike, I was pretty much alone,” I answer.

“Didn’t that make you sad?”

“Nah, I was used to it. In fact, I quite like it now.”

Instead of replying, she peers directly into my eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“So Haruma’s your first friend? Um, since you said you’d gotten used to being alone before that...” she says.

What is she thinking about right now? Now’s about the time I wish I could read minds. I mull over her question for a bit and lightly touch the scar under my eye. Finally, I respond, “Nope, there was someone else before him. He was the only one, but yeah.”

Looking back, the only happy memories from my childhood up till middle school were the times I spent with him.

She looks at me with a gentle smile and says, “I see. That’s good to hear. D’you still get along with him?”

“Nope. We kept in touch up till the last year of elementary school, but we haven’t talked since then,” I answer.

“Oh... Do you remember what he was like?” she asks.

“He was pretty wimpy, actually. Always ended up crying over the stupidest things, but he was also a really nice guy. Also, I’d say he was pretty handsome in his own right. He must be a lady killer by now.”

She looks away right when I say that. What’s wrong?

“I-I’m sorry, Tomoki-kun. It’s just that I never would’ve expected you to describe your friend like that. I mean, calling him handsome and all,” she says, her face bright red.

I look at her silently, and she casts her head downwards.

“I recall having a quiet friend back in the day, as well,” she finally whispers.

Oh, she must be talking about Touka now. I know she used to be like that, since Hasaki told me.

“If you could meet him again one day, what would you tell him, Tomoki-kun?” she asks, looking gloomy.

Hm, what would I tell him...? I mean, there’s a lot of things, actually. For starters, why did he stop hanging out with me? Why didn’t he get in contact before he left? Well, what’s the point either way? I’m socially awkward, after all—I’m confident that I wouldn’t be able to express myself properly even if I had the opportunity.

“I guess I’d ask him how’s life going, see if we can exchange our phone numbers and stuff like that?” I tell her instead.

She looks surprised by my response and says with a teasing smile, “Wow, that’s... a pretty bland response. That’s all you’d ask after so many years apart?”

“Well, you know I’m not the best at communicating with others. I don’t think I’d be able to get the right words out.”

“I see; that makes sense,” she whispers with a few nods. Then, she continues, “To be honest, I don’t think I’d have the courage to say anything to them if I ever met them again...”

Yep, I feel her on that. In reality, I'm sure she'd love to tell her long-lost friend a whole list of things, but she can't really put her feelings into words either. Just like me, she can't express herself and ends up saying nothing instead.

"I wasn't really feeling up to talking on our way to class, but I'm glad we did. I feel like we can actually end up becoming good friends one day. Don't you?" she says. Despite her optimistic words, she seems rather gloomy.

I wish I could read her mind right now. Like, what is she thinking? What is she feeling?

"Huh? Haven't we been friends for a while already, though?"

"That's... a secret," she whispers. Her sad expression leaves no room for further inquiry.



It must've been because of my conversation with Hasaki earlier, but I've been reminiscing about my old friend during class. The good old days. Screw this class. I'm way at the back, so it's not like the teacher will notice—or care, for that matter—that I'm ignoring his demonstration.

Back to my friend. I remember him being really timid and a big crybaby. Despite that, he was also someone who became my friend regardless of what the other kids thought of me. His name was... Natsuo. I'm happy I remembered his name; in fact, I can feel myself breaking out into a smile right now.

Where are you now, Natsuo? And what are you doing?

I look off wistfully in a random direction, and a girl's shriek snaps me back to reality. The girl sitting next to me got spooked by my smile, so I revert back to my typical poker face. Whatever.

Chapter 7: Providing Advice

It's the short break between classes, and I've taken a quick detour to the restroom. As I leave to head to my next class, I suddenly bump into Makiri-sensei.

"Oh, great timing, Tomoki-kun," she says, surprised.

"What's up?"

"There's something I need to talk to you about. Do you mind coming to the student counseling room after class?"

"Uh, sure," I reply.

"Okay. I'll be waiting for you at the end of school, then," she says with a radiant smile.

I'll let Touka know about this just in case. As Sensei walks away, I take my phone out and type out a message, "Gotta go to the counseling room after classes. Makiri-sensei's orders."

True to character, she immediately answers. "Wat did u do?"

"Nothing, as far as I can remember," I answer as quickly as I can.

"No flirting k? I know she's cute & all but ur mine!" she replies with an emoji of that annoying-ass character grinning attached. I swear, every time I see that little gremlin-looking thing, I can feel my blood begin to boil. She sends me another text right after, "K then text me when ur done. I'll wait for u!"

I'm glad to know she'll be waiting for me. I reply with, "Sorry about that. And thanks."



Once classes end, I head straight to the counseling room and knock on the door. Immediately, I hear, “Come on in.”

“Here I am,” I say as I enter.

Makiri-sensei is sitting in one of the chairs inside the room. She looks at me with a smile, gestures toward a seat, and says, “And I’ve been here waiting. Sorry for making you come all the way out here after all those classes. Sit down, please.”

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t have anything to do today,” I reply as I follow her instructions.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you too long, so I’ll get straight to the point,” she quickly says. She gives me a firm stare, and I subconsciously perk up and straighten my posture in response. “Could you tell me what’s been going on between you and Hasaki-san recently?” she asks. Her tone is stiff and cold.

“Well, she’s my friend,” I explain.

She flinches for a second, her face a mixture of confusion and suspicion, but quickly regains her composure. “So you’re saying you two have a friendly relationship now, yes?” she asks with some hesitation.

Even if Hasaki is “using” me to get along with Touka again, I don’t think either of us is better than each other. Actually, I feel like we’re on equal ground.

“Yeah. Is there anything wrong with that?” I reply.

“Not particularly. Um, it’s not like I doubt you; don’t get me wrong. I’ve just heard some rumors going around about your relationship with her being, uh, ‘dubious’—their words, not mine. That’s why I wanted to ask you about it personally.”

Looks like our little spectacle this morning has hit the headlines already. Damn, things really do spread like wildfire around here.

“Uh-huh. So you just wanted to check if those rumors are true, right?”

She nods without saying anything back, her face beet red. She coughs once, regains her typically-frigid composure, and remarks, “That’s right. I thought that since you’re still in a ‘relationship’ with Ike-san, it wouldn’t be the best idea to ‘cheat’ on her with Hasaki-san. I was fully prepared to scold you if that was the case, but...,” she trails off with a sigh. “In the end, rumors are just that—rumors. I can’t picture you doing something like that.”

The teachers must’ve heard the students gossiping, and that’s how she found out. She was probably worried and went out of her way to ensure what they were saying was false. It always feels nice to know that she has my back.

“I’ve just been able to get close to her lately; that’s all. They probably assumed I was ‘blackmailing’ her or something because the alternative isn’t a possibility,” I respond.

“That’s good to hear,” she says with a warm voice. Her tone and bright smile are a little too much for me, and I end up blushing. “Both Hasaki-san and Ike-san are beautiful. I assume that another guy is spreading rumors about you out of mere jealousy.”

“Yeah, that’s very possible,” I answer with a forced smile.

It’s nice to know that she’s genuinely worried about me. She’s always been at my side, and her support really warms my heart. Actually, I just remembered the last time we talked—it was when I was with Touka, and she told us we could always come to her for help. I could probably ask her about my current situation with the girls. There isn’t really anyone else I can rely on at the moment.

“There’s something I’d like your help with, if you don’t mind,” I say. Her expression lights up, which catches me off guard. “What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just surprised that you actually want my help with something. Don’t get me wrong—I’m happy to lend a helping hand. I’m glad that you’re relying on me. So, um, what is it about?” she replies with a friendly smile.

Hm, should I mention Touka and Hasaki directly? If I drop names, she might end up getting the wrong idea. Maybe it’s better to just use a hypothetical

scenario so I don't expose any identities. I decide to ask, "There are two people who used to be friends, but they've grown apart over time. What would you do to close that distance again?"

Hopefully, this is still comprehensible.

"I'd say it depends on the way their friendship ended in the first place—that alone can determine how to deal with the situation at hand. I would try to set up a situation where the two of them are forced to talk it out. That could yield results."

"But what if neither of them can be honest to each other? What then?" I ask. Like, Hasaki does talk; she just can't express what she really feels. Meanwhile, she might as well be a ghost to Touka whenever she's around. I can't imagine it would be any different if I tried to set them up.

"You could always be present and mediate between them," she muses.

"...I don't think I have enough confidence to be able to do that properly," I mumble.

"You don't need to be perfect at it. Just being there will probably help them feel more comfortable, and they'll be more open to talking," she assures me with a smile. How can I not get flustered when she looks at me like that?

"Okay... I'll try to think of a way to get them to talk to each other, then," I decide.

"I'm positive that you'll find a way," she replies with a nod. "Is there anything else you'd like to ask me about?"

I shake my head.

"Okay. Since it seems we've gotten to the bottom of your problem, you're free to leave. Touka-san is waiting for you outside, I assume?" she says.

"Yeah. How did you know?"

She giggles at my question and stares out the window. I follow her gaze. The window provides a clear view of the school's gate. Sure enough, Touka's standing there and fiddling with her phone while she waits.

"Oh, I see. Anyway, I'm going home now. Thanks for hearing me out and

giving me a hand,” I say as I rise to my feet. Just as I’m about to leave the room, she calls out to me again.

“Oh—wait a second, Tomoki-kun.”

“Yes?” I say while turning around.

She approaches me and says, “You have something in your hair. I noticed it earlier, actually. I should’ve said something about it beforehand.” She reaches out to me and pinches a piece of my hair. I brush it with one of my hands after her fingers retreat.

“Huh, I didn’t manage to get it out. Keep still,” she directs me. She extends her hand again. That’s when I notice that her face is literally right in front of mine, and I flinch as a result. My reaction doesn’t deter her, though; rather, she takes another step forward. She’s looking at me so seriously that I’m getting rather nervous. I know she just wants to remove something from my hair, and it’s clear that she’s oblivious to my current feelings. That much is obvious by how blasé she’s being about the whole thing. She starts fussing with my hair. Although she’s quite tall for a girl, she’s nothing compared to me; she still has to stand on her tiptoes to reach me. Suddenly, our eyes lock. We look at each other for a moment, and her hand freezes in place. It seems as though she’s finally aware of the situation, because she looks away and tries to take a step back. Unfortunately, she trips as she does so.

“Eek!” she yelps as she starts to fall backward. I quickly grab her arm. Normally, I’d drag her up to stop her from hitting the ground, but I’m way too embarrassed right now. I end up hesitating, and it costs me. I lose my balance and fall over, as well. If I land on top of her, it’ll just end in me squashing her. Instead, I decide to hug her and rotate so that I’m the one on the bottom. After what feels like an eternity, we make impact with the ground. I let out a groan.

“Urgh... Are you okay, Makiri-sensei?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m fine, thanks,” she says, a worried look on her face.

I can feel her breathing into one of my ears. It’s good to know that she’s okay, but I should probably be more concerned with our current position. I’m hugging her tightly, and I can feel her warmth spreading over me through her small,

slender frame. I mean, her being on top of me and all, it's pretty obvious I can feel her.

Shit, this isn't good. I need to get up as quickly as possible, but I can't move. Crap, she's looking straight at me right now. Her face is so close to me that we're practically kissing.

I'm pretty much immune to these kinds of situations if it's with Touka or other girls my age, but having Makiri-sensei glued to me like this is something else entirely. I feel like I'm about to lose it. She's stunned for an instant, but quickly rises to her feet. Seeing her move snaps me back to reality. Man, it felt like I was in some kinda trance there—her warmth and sweet scent left me dizzy.

She rearranges her clothes and stares at me. I stand up and, not able to look her in the eyes, meekly whisper, "Sorry about that..."

She takes a deep breath and says, "There's no need to apologize. I'm the one who made you fall, after all."

Oh well, of course she's fine. In her eyes, I'm nothing more than a kid, right? Actually, now that I look at her, her face is flushed a deep crimson, and she's avoiding looking in my direction. I guess I was wrong. I did push her against me, so it's no surprise she'd also be embarrassed. She's just being the adult here and playing it cool so I don't worry, right?

"Um, could you help me up? Sorry about all this," I ask. With the same concerned look, she offers her hand to me. I grab it and hoist myself up.

"Y-You don't have to worry about it. Seriously," she says while nervously playing with her hair. "I... I just wasn't expecting you to be so tall, that's all. I lost my balance when I tried to reach for your hair. My apologies. At least I managed to remove the thing from your hair."

She's probably saying this so we can avoid a similar situation occurring in the future. Yeah, you don't need to tell me twice.



“Thanks. Honestly, I should’ve just leaned forward so you could get it out easier. That way, you wouldn’t have to stand on your tiptoes,” I mutter. I can’t look at her right now. I’m just way too embarrassed, and this whole situation feels so... awkward.

“I suppose so, although neither of us thought of that,” she replies. I manage to catch a glimpse of her, and her face is still flushed. It’s not the tripping she’s embarrassed about.

“Anyway, I’ll be going now,” I say while making a beeline for the door.

“Mhm. Goodbye. Be careful on the way home,” she answers coolly behind me.

I exit the room as quickly as possible, my eyes fixed on the ground the entire time.

Chapter 8: A Rewarding Experience

It's now the evening, and I'm mulling over the advice Makiri-sensei gave me earlier. She recommended that I find a way to get them to talk to each other. That's cool and all, but what would be the best way to go about that? Besides, even if I do manage to come up with something, there are still two issues at hand: first of all, Touka would definitely decline the invitation if she knew Hasaki's coming along. Second, I don't think I'm fit for the role of solo mediator. Like if a fight broke out, for example, I can't see myself interfering.

Actually... that's assuming that I'd be doing it alone. If I have someone else with me who actually knows how to deal with people, everything could go better. And I happen to know just the guy. I pull out my phone and punch in their number. I call twice, but no dice. I'll try it one more time. You know what they say: third time's the charm.

"Hello? Yuuji? What's up?" Ike answers. Yeah, I'm sure if Ike's there, then things will turn out all right. He's known them way longer than I have, so he'll be a real help in this situation.

"Hey. I know this is pretty sudden, but do you have any plans for tomorrow or the day after?" I say.

"Uh... Damn, okay. That is pretty sudden, not to mention unexpected," he comments. I can tell he's surprised, and not in a good way. I figured this wouldn't be easy. "Gimme a sec... I'm free tomorrow, I guess. What do you need me for?"

"Remember when you told me you owe me one for helping out with the student council? Well, now I'm gonna have to cash in on that. Could you hang

out with me and Touka tomorrow?”

He did promise me an I-O-U as compensation for the work I did during the Golden Week student council event. Now, it's time for me to use it.

“Sure, I don't mind at all. Hold on, you said Touka's coming, too?” he asks.

“...Honestly, I have no clue if she will,” I dubiously mumble.

Ike laughs clearly and says, “Oh, well. If you invite her, I can't see her rejecting you, even if she does get mad about me being there. Sounds like a plan.”

He still thinks we're a couple, so that's why he's assuming Touka will be happy about the whole deal. Of course, it's a total misunderstanding.

“You okay with me inviting Hasaki, as well?” I ask.

“Inviting Kana?” he responds, now sounding slightly worried.

“Uh, yeah. We're getting along better now, so I thought why not have her join us, too. You feel me?”

He stays silent for a brief moment, then whispers, “I get you. Okay, I'll try to help as much as possible.” Although his voice is low, he sounds pretty happy.

Wow. I haven't even explained the situation to him, and he's already picked up on everything. That's the protagonist of this story for you. Nice going, dude; keep it up.

“Thanks, much appreciated,” I say.

“No worries, man. Okay, how about you call them and let them know about tomorrow? As for where we'll hang out... leave it to me. I'll shoot you a text message once I've figured it all out.”

“Sure, I'll leave that to you. Talk to you later,” I say.

“Yep, see ya,” he replies and hangs up. I trust in Ike to come up with a good spot, especially considering I've never done this sort of thing with others before. I send Hasaki a text and ask if she has any plans for tomorrow. She replies back almost instantly.

“Yeah, I'm free tomorrow! What's up?” she asks. Damn, that was fast.

I'll just let her know that Ike and I are meeting up after school tomorrow and

ask if she's interested in tagging along.

"Sure! Once you guys figure out the details, get back to me! Can't wait!" she replies along with a sticker of a cute smiling character.

Nice, looks like Ike and Hasaki are in. Now all that's left is Touka. She's the most important member, so I can't afford to mess this up. At the same time, she'll definitely be furious and hate me if I lie and give her some excuse. Oh well, whatever. Honesty's the best policy, in this case—I'll tell her what's going on straight up and let the gods decide my fate.

"Wanna hang out with me, Ike, and Hasaki tomorrow?" I ask.

As I flip-flop between regretting my text and reassuring myself, her reply arrives. Let's see what it says...



The fated afternoon is finally upon us. I'm waiting at our designated meet-up spot—the train station's ticket barrier. I'm actually a little early, so I can take it easy.

"Hey, Tomoki-kun!" a girl's voice calls out. It's Kana, who's approaching me with a big smile. "It's incredibly easy to spot you. I mean, you're just so tall!"

"Hey. Sorry for inviting you out of the blue like this," I say.

"It's fine, really! I'm actually overjoyed you even thought of me!" she chirps.

Well, I still haven't explained my plan to her or the real reason for this meet-up, so we'll see. I warn her, "I'm not the best at organizing stuff like this, so don't expect a lot."

"Seriously, I'm happy you invited me. That's more than enough for me," she reiterates.

"Oh, you're already here, Senpai! Sorry for the wait!"

"Looks like we made you both wait."

Two voices call out—sounds like Ike and Touka have arrived. Touka actually accepted without making too much of a fuss, which was truly surprising. I was expecting her to fight me on it, but I won't complain. I'm not trying to jinx myself.

"Yo," I greet them.

"You haven't kept us waiting at all. You guys actually came here together?" Hasaki asks while looking at them incredulously.

Touka quickly positions herself beside me and explains, "Well, my brother went out before I did, but we promised to meet up at the ticket station in the end, so yeah." She looks over at Ike for confirmation. He nods and says, "Yep. I left a little earlier so I could check our route there."

"You went and did all of that?" I ask.

"Wow. So I guess you're our guide for today, then?" Hasaki follows up.

"You bet. Leave it to me," Ike says.

"Oh, come on... What's with the smug look, dude? I bet you it won't take more than 5 minutes to get there," Touka chides him.

"How about you lead the way then, Touka?" he retorts.

"Huh? Ain't happening. I gotta spend some time with Yuuji-senpai. Right, Senpai?"

"Uh, okay. Let's get going, then," I butt in, only wanting to escape this awkward situation.

"Oh, come on, Senpai. You know it's easy to tell when you're trying to hide your embarrassment," she says in a sickly-sweet voice while locking our arms together.

Ike's smiling at me and Hasaki's looking at us awkwardly. God, this is so embarrassing. I wish we didn't have to do this, but she'll throw a fit if I let go of her arm. I have to play along.

I start walking toward the exit with Touka; Ike and Hasaki quickly follow behind. Weird how nothing really bad's happened yet between us. I guess this is good news for the rest of the day? I still need to keep an eye on Touka, though—

I know things can go south really quickly and spoil our day.



Just like Touka said, it only takes us around 5 minutes to reach our destination. Once we arrive at the front gate, Ike's choice becomes apparent. Ike already told me where we were going, but the girls quickly catch on.

"It's been so long since I've been to a zoo," Hasaki says.

Ike's reasoning for the location was, in his words, "The two of them will likely be more open to talking if they're around a bunch of cute animals. It's less stressful for everyone." Honestly, I think it's a fantastic idea.

"If I remember correctly, the last time I went was when I was in elementary school."

"I remember the last time," Kana follows up. "It was with some friends in middle school."

"Nice, looks like no one's been here for some time. That should make things fun," Ike says with a smile.

We purchase our tickets and enter. Since it's a Saturday, it's filled with couples and families with children. We grab a few pamphlets, filled with information and a map, and check the layout.

"Does anyone have a place they'd like to check out first?" Kana asks.

"I... don't have one, to be honest," Touka answers. I nod in agreement—I don't have any preferences, either.

"Well, it's not like we're in a rush. I'm pretty sure that if we start now, we'll be able to get through everything today. Why don't we just follow the map and do it like that?" Ike proposes.

There are no objections, so we follow the layout as directed by the pamphlet. The first stop is to see the elephants. I knew they were big animals, but seeing them in person is still astounding. Forget big, they're absolutely massive—I feel

sorta intimidated by them. It never gets old to watch them use their trunks to feed themselves.

“They’re so big.”

“They’re up to four meters tall and can weigh around seven tons. It also says they can run up to 40 kilometers per hour. That’s impressive,” Ike notes as he reads the informational placard in front of the exhibit.

You’re telling me this thing can run at nearly the same speed as Usain Bolt? Holy crap.

“I’m guessing they’ve got pretty sharp reflexes as well, despite their size. Wouldn’t want to get in a fight with them, that’s for sure,” I whisper to myself.

“What’re you whispering about, Senpai?” Touka asks. She’s curious about what I just muttered to myself. I guess it was pretty weird and out of the blue, yeah.

“I just feel nervous when I’m around them. Nervous enough to end up talking to myself as a result, as you’ve just witnessed,” I reply.

Look, I’m tall, but they’re absolutely gigantic in comparison. It’s like it makes me realize how small I really am in the grand scheme of things, you feel me? It’s the same deal when some people see the sea or look out into space. It’s strange, though—my first thought upon seeing them was if I could win in a fight against one of them. Why the hell would I ask myself that question?

Touka concedes on finding an answer. She gets pensive for a bit, then jokes, “Whenever you say things like that, it makes you seem younger! Kinda like you’re a scared little middle schooler or something! It’s so cute!”

I couldn’t care less if it’s cute or not. I’ve just been compared to a scrawny little preteen. How am I supposed to say anything back? Oh, well. I refuse to play her little game, so I remain silent and go to check the next animal instead.

“Look, Senpai, it’s a tiger! Isn’t it suuuper scary?! Not even you would stand a chance against this big guy. Well, unless you used something like a bat covered in, like, rusty nails,” she shouts excitedly while pointing at the tiger. She’s definitely not scared of him.

“I doubt I’d be able to do anything, even with that bat you described,” I say.

“That one doesn’t look very friendly. Just look at the others—they’re so tame, and then you have this one. He looks pissed,” Ike adds.

I look over at the other tigers lounging in the distance. It’s true; they’re not nearly as scary as the one closest to us. I never really pondered it before, but as I nod to what Ike said, I realize how similar tigers really are to us. Each one of them has their own distinct personality which separates them from the rest. The ones in the back bring to mind that some people refer to them as just bigger versions of house cats, so I find them pretty cute.

“Tomoki-kun, you and that tiger have really similar-looking eyes. That’s so cool!” Hasaki beams.

“Wow, Hasaki-senpai, you sure are a coy little kitten—one who likes to flirt blatantly with my boyfriend, no less. Aren’t tigers and cats from the same family or something like that? Why don’t you enter their exhibit and try making friends, huh?” Touka snaps, firing shots at her with lightning speed.

“I’m not trying to flirt with him, Touka-chan. I’m just pointing out what an amazing guy you have, and how lucky you are to be with him,” Hasaki follows up with a forced smile. She clearly feels uncomfortable about all this.

Touka quits with her venomous glare and turns her attention to me. Phew, looks like we’ve avoided a disaster.

“She’s right, though... your eyes do look awfully similar. They’re the eyes of a predator that’s fixed on its prey, ready to strike. Just like you when you were staring at my thighs a little while ago!” she sneers, looking over at me with a devilish smile.

Uh, nice joke, Touka. And by nice joke, I mean it sucks and I’m not too happy about it. I’ll take “incidents that never happened” for 200, Alex.

“Aren’t you crossing the line a little too much?” I answer as flatly as possible. She replies with a soft grumble and then deflects by saying, “Let’s just go and look at the next area.”

She takes off, and Ike and I trail her. Hasaki falls behind; she doesn’t look too up for coming along.

“What’s wrong, Kana?” Ike asks her.

“Oh, nothing. Let’s go!” she exclaims. It seems like she was taking some pictures of the mean-looking tiger with her phone. She must’ve really taken a shine to it. After finishing up with that, she follows after us.

“Wow, a giraffe! Look at that neck! It’s sooo long!” Touka shouts.

“So their blood pressure is through the roof, I see,” Ike murmurs to himself as he examines the placard. He’s clearly intrigued by them, so I decide to check it out, as well.

“Huh, so it’s twice as high as ours? Damn,” I marvel.

It explains their pressure is around 280/180 mm Hg. Considering how long their necks are, it’s definitely a necessity to get the blood pumping up to the head. I realize the difference between us is massive, but just seeing those numbers is pretty staggering. Just imagining our blood pressure at those levels makes me shiver; it seems like Ike is just as riled up as I am about it.

“I think that unless you took out that thing’s legs, it’d wipe the floor with you, Yuuji-senpai,” Touka suddenly butts in with a grin on her face.

Well, since Touka seems to be in a joking mood, I’ll play along this time.

“I guess I’d stand a chance if that were the case, yeah,” I muse.

“Pfffff! What the—?!” Touka spits. She wasn’t expecting that answer at all. It’s nice to see her struggle from time to time. Feels good.



After watching the other animals for a while, we decide to take a break in the food court.

“Yuuji and I will go and buy some drinks for everyone. In the meantime, can you two grab us some seats?” Ike proposes.

“Okay. I want an iced tea,” Touka gives her order.

“I want the same thing as Touka-chan!” Hasaki adds.

Nice, no complaints from either of them.

“Let’s get going, then,” Ike says. I nod and head toward the line to get drinks with him. Looks like we actually managed to get them alone without any issues. I swear, Ike is a frickin’ genius. I wish I could be a fraction of what he is.

“Looking at them, what do you think of their situation, Yuuji?” he suddenly asks me.

“On the surface, things seem okay, but I can tell Touka’s trying to avoid any type of contact with Hasaki. From the outside looking in, you’d think they were strangers. Have they been like this for a long time?”

Ike smiles at my response. “What?” I ask.

“I’m just happy that you know how my sister feels. You can read her pretty well now. But yeah... they used to get along well, although that definitely isn’t the case now that’s for sure,” he replies.

“I’m assuming Touka’s dead set on not making up at all? She’s the type that would never say it outright.”

“I’m not too sure about that, to be honest. What I do know is that even though they’ve drifted apart, they’ve still talked to each other on the odd occasion. Maybe we should just give them more time and more opportunities like this. Who knows, maybe they’ll end up on good terms again?”

“I... I guess,” I mutter. I can’t really say much else since he knows them better than I do. I can’t see them becoming buddy-buddy with each other like “the good ol’ days” in a matter of just a few days, though. Like he said, it’ll take time... time and a lot of effort. All we can do is continue creating these chances and hope for the best.

“Oh, looks like the guys in front of us are done,” Ike says, interrupting my train of thought.

Sure enough, the line’s moved up. Okay, time to order those drinks.



We finish our drinks and resume our tour. It's the same drill—we look at the animals, talk about stuff, joke around, the usual. It feels like we're all friends, which is sort of weird but fulfilling at the same time. I'm mostly focused on the interactions between Touka and Hasaki. Hasaki is more open with her emotions. Although she's clearly not entirely comfortable, it's obvious she wants to get closer to Touka. Unfortunately, Touka hasn't given her many openings. These are just my impressions from watching the two of them, though—I'm no mind reader, and I haven't found a moment to speak to Hasaki alone about it.

“Whoa! These dudes sure like licking us all over, don't they!”

“Yeah, seriously.”

Touka and Ike are giving a live commentary as they feed the capybaras. Even after the animals are finished with the food, they continue to tongue at Ike and Touka's hands till they're spotless.

“I guess that's their thing.”

“I'll let them off the hook 'cause they're just so cute, but this little guy's made my hand all sticky. I'm gonna go wash them now,” Touka says.

“I'll go, too,” Ike replies, and the two of them head off toward a nearby fountain, leaving Hasaki and I alone. I know the siblings won't be gone for long, but it's a good chance for me to catch up with her.

“How's it going? Making any progress?” I ask her as I watch other people feed the capybaras.

“Hmm... Well, it's not going to be smooth sailing to get back to how we were before,” she answers without even turning to look at me.

“What did you two talk about while we were off getting the drinks?”

“We talked about which of the animals we liked the most so far. Just some small talk so things wouldn't get awkward,” she replies.

“I mean, that's a start, at least.” I mean it. They haven't spoken much in years, right? That makes this good news.

“I guess, yeah,” she says. She seems pretty chill about everything. She probably

already knows that this'll take time. Even if things don't go well today, she can always try again next time. She continues, "Thanks for inviting me today, by the way. Being with you and the others reminds me of the old days, and it makes me really happy."

She finally turns to look at me as she speaks, but quickly turns her gaze to the ground and fidgets shyly. It's nice to see she's that happy about our little excursion.

"I'm sure that, in time, you two will make up. I'll be right here helping you out, so don't worry," I try to reassure her.

She smiles briefly, which I wasn't quite expecting, then looks down at the ground again and whispers, "Mhm. I think at this rate, I'll end up making amends with her eventually. Yeah, for sure."

"Hm?" I ask. I think she wanted to say something else to expand on the topic, but I can't really tell for sure.

"Something up?" she asks while petting a nearby capybara.

Do I ask her, or should I just drop it and take what she said at face value? Actually, it doesn't sound like I'll have the chance to do either—Touka and Ike are heading our way now.

"Sorry for making you wait, Seenpai!" Touka shouts.

"Sorry about that, guys," Ike follows up.

"We haven't been waiting for that long. Right, Tomoki-kun?" Hasaki says.

"Yeah. Probably no more than five minutes," I answer.

We leave the capybara zone, and Touka locks her arm in mine again. "Let's head to the next place!" she proclaims. Guess this is a game of "Follow the Leader" now. I just wish I didn't have to walk around with her hanging off of me like this, but oh well.



“I had fun today, not gonna lie,” Hasaki says.

We’re on the train on our way home. Fortunately, there were four seats open right next to each other when we entered, so that’s where we’re seated now. The four of us are discussing our experiences today.

“Yeah, that was fun,” I answer.

“I’m glad I planned it out, then,” Ike says, looking content.

“What about you, Touka?” I ask her. Touka’s fiddling with her phone, but when she hears my question, she grins and puts it down. She leans in and whispers into my ear, “Would’ve been better without those two, but still...” After a deep breath, she cheerfully adds, “But of course I had fun! I mean, dating you is fun in general.”

Looks like she and Hasaki didn’t make too much progress, but I’m still glad to know that everyone had fun.



We part ways, and everyone heads home.

Now that I think about it... even though I promised Hasaki that I’d help her, I didn’t end up doing much today. I guess I was too engrossed in our hangout; I mean, it’s the first time I’ve done something like that with friends. I haven’t felt so joyful in a while.

Today’s been a good day.

Chapter 9: The Study Meet

The weekend's over, and it's back to the grind.

Classes are over for the day. Club activities are on hold for now because of the upcoming exams taking place next week. Not like I care in particular, since I was never in a club in the first place, so yeah.

As I'm preparing to go home, Ike and Asakura call out to me. Normally, they'd head to their respective clubs right away, but I guess today's a little different.

"Hey, Tomoki. Wanna come and study with us at DonMac? Professor Ike over here is joining us, so things should go a lot smoother," Asakura says while patting Ike's shoulder.

Ike looks at him with a smile and says, "I know you're partial to your club activities, but sometimes, you should prioritize your studies."

"What can I say, man? Playing volleyball makes me feel young and free. I don't even care about getting good grades. As long as I pass, it's no sweat off my back. Why can't you just let me cram the night before and leave it at that?"

"You don't care about having good grades? That's not really something you should be proud of, dude," Ike replies.

"So I can join you guys?"

The two of them exchange confused looks.

"I mean, of course. We just invited you to come with us, didn't we?" Asakura says incredulously.

I wasn't expecting to be invited to a study meet—of all things—today, but I'm very happy that they did. They've really made my day.

“Yeah, of course I’ll come,” I reply.

They burst out into laughter.

“Whaaat? You guys are gonna go study together?!” Hasaki suddenly butts in. She then adds, with a bright smile, “I’m free this afternoon, too—do you guys mind if I tag along?”

Asakura matches her smile and jokingly responds, “You wanna come, too?! Sweet! I was beginning to get a little depressed about having to be stuck studying with these two dumbasses.”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Ike says. I nod in agreement.

“Nice! Let’s do our best, guys!” she exclaims.

“Let’s go to the DonMac in front of the station, then,” Asakura suggests. As we’re about to leave, though, we’re stopped by someone bursting into the class.

“Yuuji-senpai! Let’s walk home together!” Touka shouts.

If memory serves me correctly, I promised her that we’d study for the exams together, right? “Sorry, Touka, but we’re gonna go and study at the DonMac near the station,” I inform her.

She looks surprised by that. She gives each of us a look-over and ends on me. Suddenly, she turns to Asakura and asks, “You’re gonna go with them? Can I join too, then?”

Huh. I was expecting her to throw a huge fit because I prioritized hanging out with others over her, but her solution makes me feel a little less nervous about it.

“You bet you can! The more cute girls, the merrier!” Asakura cheerfully replies. His tone then suddenly shifts, becoming more gloomy as he utters, “But no flirting while we’re studying, all right? Seriously, I mean it. Please.”

“Oh well, that’s a shame. But at least we’ll be together, right, Senpai? Isn’t that about the only thing we need to be happy?” she says while smiling.

Why does she have to try and make every situation about us? Haven’t we convinced everyone about our “relationship” enough already?

Asakura notices my dour expression, and the two guys pat both of my

shoulders consolingly. Hasaki doesn't say anything, instead responding with a bitter smile. That's likely because Touka's decided to join in, and it's going to make the whole thing awkward. Oh well, this could be another great opportunity to get them to talk to each other, even if just for a little while. I should take advantage of this opportunity.

So it looks like, in the end, we're all going to the DonMac together. We pack our things and leave the classroom.



Ike, Asakura, and Hasaki lead the way, with Touka and I following closely behind them. She seems to be in a good mood today.

"You surprised me there," I say.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I was expecting you to get all pissed that I chose to go with Asakura and the others. Instead, you decided to tag along. So, yeah, I'm quite surprised."

"Huh? Aren't you being a little bit too honest with me, Senpai?" she says with a smile. She adds, with her cheeks slightly flushed, "I think I've said this before, but I'm only here because of you, Senpai. I couldn't care less about my brother and the rest. Plus, making more friends is always a good thing in your case."

It's always nice to see her act like this. She doesn't have many moments that make me think, "Damn, she really can be a nice person when she puts her mind to it," but the few that she has are worth treasuring.

"Thanks," I tell her.

She seems surprised by my response and nervously says, "Oh, but don't get the wrong idea about what I said! I'm cool with you having friends, but I absolutely forbid you to hang out alone with other girls! Don't want anybody getting suspicious about our relationship and whatever."

"Don't worry. I can't even recall ever having a chance to be alone with another

girl; you're the only one."

"Yeah, not buying it. But sure, whatever you say, I guess," she retorts as she glares at Hasaki's back.

I guess she has a point—ever since we became "friends," the two of us have been able to hang out a good deal. I'm sure there'll be some more opportunities for us to be alone in the future, but still...

"I don't think they'll talk about me and Hasaki. Everyone knows she has a thing for Ike, anyway," I reply.

"Aren't people already spreading rumors about you two, though?" she mutters.

"You really shouldn't pay much attention to those idiotic rumors about me 'blackmailing' her."

"Yeah, but I'm still worried about her, y'know...?" she whispers as she directs her gaze at the ground again. Maybe I should console her somehow? Before I can say anything, however, she suddenly cuts in with, "But it's all good! We'll just have to counter that crap by acting more lovey-dovey in front of everyone!"

"...I guess," I say with a forced smile.

"Um, anyways, I still think it'd be nice for us to study alone one day. I mean, that's what couples do, right?" she asks while staring fixedly at the ground and fidgeting. She reaches out to tug on one of my sleeves and adds, "You better have your schedule open this Saturday. Got it?"

"Sure, I will."

Her cheeks flush a cute pink at my words. She nods, smiles, and exclaims, "Nice! I can't wait!"



We finally arrive at our study spot. A waiter quickly rushes over to welcome us, but the moment she sees me, her friendly smile turns into an expression of pure terror. Regardless, she leads us to an empty table.

“Okay, Senpai, you and I will sit on this side!” Touka quickly proclaims as she ushers me over to one side of the table. “My brother can sit on the opposite side with Asakura-senpai. That way, it’ll be easier for him to help Asakura study. Hasaki-senpai can sit at the end of the table, okay?”

“Sounds good,” Asakura says, and he heads to his designated seat. Ike follows suit with a, “After you, dude.”

“So this is where I’m sitting. Okay,” Hasaki says as she sits beside Ike. She doesn’t look too happy about the arrangement. Maybe she wanted to be next to Touka? Once she’s certain everyone’s in their designated spot, Touka smiles and plops herself down next to me.

I guess the easy part’s over; now it’s time for the hard part: studying. Oh boy.

“I’m assuming everyone wants a drink, but you guys want anything else with that?” Asakura asks as he presses the button on the table used to signal a waiter. Everyone shakes their heads as he arrives and takes Asakura’s order. We all decided to get a drink bar pass, which means we get fountain drinks with free refills as long as we’re here.

“Okay, guys—I’m going to go get my drink now, if that’s cool. I’ll get yours too, okay, Senpai?” Touka says as she stands up.

“Sure, thanks,” I reply.

“I gotchu!” she answers with a smile and leaves.

“Oh, then I guess I should go and get the drinks for me and everyone else. Haruma, Asakura, you guys okay with this?” Hasaki asks while staring at them.

“Sure. I’ll have a Loca Cola, then! Thanks!” Asakura replies.

“I’ll have just tea, thanks,” Ike adds.

“All right! I’ll be back in a minute!” she exclaims. She stands up and follows Touka.

“Looks like things between you two are going well, eh?” Ike asks me once he ensures the girls are out of earshot.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask.

“Could I make it any more obvious? I’m talking about you and Touka?” he says incredulously.

“I’m so fucking jealous!” Asakura blurts out as loudly as socially acceptable.

It sucks that they still believe our relationship is real. I wish I could just blurt out the truth right now. “Thanks to you, Ike, yeah,” I simply say.

“Touka tends to be... a difficult person, let’s say. Generally, she never does favors for anyone, so, like, it’s pretty amazing she went out of her way to grab you a drink,” Ike explains.

“Yuuji, you lucky bastard...” Asakura grumbles.

What am I supposed to say? I can’t really come up with a good response. Oh, phew—Touka’s coming back. Great timing. She’s holding a glass in each hand, and she hands one to me.

“Thanks,” I say as I receive the drink. I can’t wait to take a sip... Wait, she brought me black coffee. Why was this her choice out of everything on the menu?

Ike chortles and says, “Now that I think about it, she didn’t even ask you what you wanted.”

“So she knows you so well she doesn’t even need to ask? Damn, color me impressed,” Asakura says.

“Oh, come on, guys—Isn’t it, like, every girl’s dream to know everything about the person they like? That’s what I’m trying to go for, at least,” Touka giggles. Even at this study meet, she’s trying her hardest to convince everyone of our charade. You truly never disappoint, Touka.

“Oh, so Tomoki-kun likes coffee, huh? I’ll keep it in mind, too!” Hasaki suddenly adds. She’s returned to the table and places everyone else’s drinks on it.

“Why would you go out of your way to learn about a random classmate, though?” Touka snaps, taking on a defensive attitude.

“Well, I just figured that maybe there’ll be a time where I might have to get the drinks instead of you. It’s fine, Touka-chan—no need to worry. I wouldn’t dare to try and steal your amazing boyfriend,” she replies with a clearly-forced smile.

I need to keep in mind that Hasaki is trying to get along with Touka, not me. If only Touka knew... She stares suspiciously at the other girl for a moment, but takes a deep breath and manages to calm down. She follows, “If that’s the case, then I guess I don’t mind. Anyways, let’s get to studying already! If there’s something I don’t know, I hope someone here can give me a hand! Wink wink!”

“I’m trash at studying, so don’t bother asking me much,” I add.

“Oh, come on! Don’t be such a party pooper!” Touka whines as she puffs her cheeks and pouts.



We study for about an hour or so. Well, I say we, but it’s mostly been Ike helping Asakura and Hasaki out. He hasn’t had much time to study in peace as a result. Touka also asks me the odd question every now and then; surprisingly enough, they’ve all been questions I can actually help her with.

“Damn, Senpai—you’re actually, like, super smart,” Touka marvels after I help her with a particularly-challenging question.

“Well, during last year’s exams, Yuuji ended up ranking seventh in our grade. He’s actually pretty intelligent,” Ike notes.

“Whaaat?! Seventh?! That’s amazing, Senpai! I don’t know why my brother’s looking so smug about it, but yeah! I find it, like, super cool that you’ve got brains to match! I think I’m falling for you even harder now!” she exclaims while looking right at me.

Ike smiles at us, and Hasaki lets out a little giggle. Unfortunately, not everyone seems thrilled about Touka’s gushing, because Asakura glumly adds, “What did I say about flirting while studying?” He’s covering his head with his arms to avoid looking at us.

I turn my attention toward Hasaki. Once I get a good look at her face, it suddenly—and rather randomly—dawns on me that I haven’t helped her out with Touka yet. I did promise her that I’d do something, so I’d better change the

mood now. No more of this weird “romance.” I take a deep breath and say, “Never would’ve thought that studying with others would be so enjoyable, actually.”

This could be a great start for us—we could create a small group of friends and start hanging out more often. That’ll give Hasaki the chance to be around Touka more. Everyone stops talking and looks at me silently. Was I wrong? Was this just a formal, one-off thing?

“Let’s study together tomorrow, too. Is everyone cool with that?” Ike asks with a smile.

“Sure! I actually think this is pretty fun, too!” Touka adds.

“Should’ve said something earlier, man. Count me in!” Asakura adds, now back to his normal cheerful self.

“I usually have tennis club after school, but it’d be fun to study with you guys whenever I can,” Hasaki says.

I’m speechless and totally on the verge of tears. Everyone here is so kind to me. I wasn’t sure if they’d even want to meet up after this, but they actually want to hang out again? Finally, I manage to whisper a feeble, “Y-Yeah.”

“Actually, Tomoki, I wanted to ask you something—is Ike your first friend?” Asakura questions me out of the blue. Before I get the chance to reply, Touka jumps in and exclaims, “No, actually! Apparently, he had a friend in elementary school. That was way before he ever knew my brother!”

“Oh? Who was this friend?” Ike asks.

“Um... That’s about all I know about them, so...” Touka trails off. Her voice is cold. Hah, she must be fuming that Ike pressed for details she didn’t know. And she was so confident, too. I fill the others in instead.

“Up until I started junior high, I often went to my grandpa’s place in the middle of the countryside during summer vacation. There was this other kid who spent his vacation there, too. We were the same age and dealt with similar circumstances, so we ended up bonding over that. His name was Natsuo.”

The moment I say his name, there’s a loud crashing sound. It looks like

Hasaki's glass dropped out of her hands and shattered upon impact, since there's liquid pooling on the table.

"Whoa, are you okay? Here, use this," Asakura says as he quickly hands a napkin to her.

"Y-Yeah. Sorry about that; I guess I zoned out for a bit," she says. She accepts the napkin and starts cleaning up the mess. For some reason, she's staring at me and Ike while doing so instead of focusing on the task at hand.

"So... what was this Natsuo person like?" Touka asks with a stiff tone.

"He was pretty frail and sensitive. Man, let me tell you—he cried over just about every little thing. But he was brave, too; a really nice kid," I explain. At least, that's what comes to mind when I think back on my remaining memories of him.

"And what did he look like?" Ike asks.

"As a matter of fact, he was super cute. Like, he could've easily been mistaken for a girl if he didn't make it clear. I remember that he also had really beautiful hair—it was short, brown, and really well-kept. Just incredible. I bet he's drowning in girls right now."

Another strange sound jolts me out of my memories. Hasaki's finished cleaning and is frantically jotting something down in her notebook. It's loud enough that it grabs everyone's attention, as well. She suddenly stands up, slaps some change on the table, bows, and shouts, "I-I'm sorry, guys! I just realized I promised my tennis buddies that I'd practice with them today. Sorry, but I absolutely m-must go now!" And with that, she rushes out of the store.

"What's the deal with her?" Asakura asks.

"No clue," I answer.

"That Natsuo guy..." Ike muses.

"You're thinking what I'm thinking, right?" Touka says.

"Yeah, most likely..." he replies.

They both nod, as if they know something I don't. Oh, that must be what it is. "Do the two of you know Natsuo, by any chance?" I ask them.

Judging from their incredibly smug looks right now, I can see that being the case. It would be awesome if they did—sure, it's been years since I last saw him, but I still consider him to be a friend. I've been wondering where he is and what he's been up to lately.

"Natsuo's—" Touka begins to speak, looking rather unhappy.

"Sorry, Yuuji, but that's top-secret info. Right, Touka?" Ike quickly interrupts her.

"O-Oh yeah, I guess so. Actually, yes—we can't tell you anything, Senpai!" she shouts.

"Uh, okay. If you're so adamant about it, then I guess I won't dig any deeper. But if you guys actually know him, can I ask just one thing?"

They nod in unison.

"Is he doing all right?" I ask.

The siblings look at each other and smile.

"I was totally expecting something else, but that's definitely something you'd ask," Touka says.

"Yeah, I was pretty nervous, too. I'm relieved he didn't ask anything weird. No worries, Yuuji—he's doing fine," Ike reassures me.

"I don't really get what you guys are talking about, but I hope I can meet Natsuo one day," Asakura says, clearly confused by the entire situation.

"If that's the case, then I'm good," I reply.

We move on from that convo and study for another hour or so; after said hour passes, we wrap up our study meet.

"We made a lot of progress today, actually. You guys good with continuing this tomorrow?"

"Normally, I'd tell you to study by yourself, but seeing you so eager to hit the books for once in your life makes it hard to turn you down, to be honest," Ike says with a laugh. He's such a nice guy.

"Are you guys okay with me coming along with you tomorrow, too, Asakura-

senpai?” Touka asks.

“Of course! Like I said before, cute girls are always welcome! But no flirting with Tomoki tomorrow!” he emphatically says with a heated glare pointed at us. Can you please not look at me like that? Come on, dude.

“Roger that! You heard him, Senpai—no flirting unless he’s out of sight, ‘kay?” Touka says.

Asakura looks over at me with a drained expression.

“Let’s keep it to a minimum,” I say as flatly as possible as I try to ignore Touka.

Our study meet’s over for today, but we still have a long road ahead of us.

The next day, we all decide to hang out at the same spot for our study session... only this time, Hasaki’s nowhere to be seen.



Most people have unpleasant memories when they look back on the week before exams, but I’ve actually been having the time of my life these past few days. Every day after school, I hang out with Ike, Touka, and Asakura, and we set ourselves up for our tests together. Ike helps me out with any subjects I have issues with. Seriously, I feel like I’m going to own this year’s tests in comparison to last year.

It would’ve been nice if Hasaki could participate, but she hasn’t joined us ever since the first time. I assume she’s busy with her tennis club stuff. I realize tennis is really important for her, but I’m also a bit worried—didn’t she want to get along with Touka and all that? She’s missing out on some great opportunities here.

Finally, it’s the weekend before exams.

“Sorry for making you wait, Yuuji-senpai!” Touka cheerily shouts the moment she sees me waiting for her near the train station’s entrance. Her makeup looks different than what she usually wears at school, and she has a mini skirt on which

flutters as she moves, showing off her thighs. She's definitely in weekend mode.

"Sup," I say with a nod.

"Let's go and study at the cafe!" she exclaims while taking my hand and leading me in that direction.



We end up at a pretty fancy cafe near the train station. It's filled with teenagers just like us, couples, and a ton of good-looking guys. I'm totally out of my element here. Can I just turn around and leave before it's too late?

"Why can't we just go to the same place we always go to?"

Asakura recently let me in on one of his secret drinks—he mixes a bunch of stuff from the fountains together. That shit was dope. I wish I could've had some more today. And to think that you could get such an awesome drink for a measly couple of bucks. The guy's an absolute genius. Meanwhile, this place smells of fancy coffee and pastries. Anyway, what I'm trying to say here is that I felt way more comfortable at the DonMac. To be completely honest, I just feel completely out of place here.

Touka puts a finger over her lips, as if pondering how to answer my question. "Hmm... Overruled. That place blows as a dating spot, if you ask me," she says with a flirty tone and a coy smile.

"I mean, if you say so," I say with a shrug. Looks like I have no choice in the matter; I'll just have to grin and bear it.

We check out the menu and order. I ask for a simple iced coffee, but Touka's ordered some kind of weird tea with an unpronounceable name. As we wait for the drinks to arrive, we spread our books out on the table. The drinks arrive with perfect timing. Touka nods and says, "Okay, Senpai! The tests are just a few days away, so let's concentrate!"

"Yeah," I respond.

She takes one of her pens and turns her attention toward one of her notebooks.



For a while, we manage to study without many issues. As I sip my coffee, which is starting to become diluted from all the ice, Touka suddenly opens the menu and stares at it intently.

“Hmm...” she muses.

“What’s up?”

She looks up at me and asks, “Are you a fan of sweets, Senpai? I really wanna try the pancakes, but I can’t eat the whole thing—I’d get soooo fat. D’you wanna split one with me?”

“I think you’re cute as is. I wouldn’t mind if you put on a few extra pounds, in all honesty.”

“Whoa, Senpai. You might think I don’t put in much work for my figure, but I actually exercise a whole lot, y’know? I gotta stay focused. If I slip up, things could go south real quick!” she retorts.

“Oh, so that’s why you’re so pretty, huh?”

What I mean by that is that she’s very attractive and stylish as well. She’s definitely in shape, but not jacked, you know? She still looks very feminine. But it seems like she works hard to look the way she does—without exercise and care, she probably would look completely different. I didn’t know that.

“I... I do it so you can proudly parade around declaring that I’m your girlfriend, y’know?!” she jokes, but her face goes beet red. She mumbles under her breath, “Crap, I can’t bring myself to tell you that with a straight face. I just can’t!”

What’s got her so embarrassed right now? I just told her that—oh, shit, I told her she was cute. Right. Now I’m the one who’s embarrassed. I should’ve made it clear what I actually meant, but what’s done is done. I can’t really explain myself

right now, because I'm too occupied with having a staring contest with the floor. Maybe I should put on my usual poker face and say something to lighten the mood. "Oopsie?" I barely manage to get out while feigning normalcy. I clear my throat and say, "Ahem... Anyways, you're gonna order the pancakes, right? I feel like eating something sweet, too, so go for it."

This is so insanely awkward. Come on, let's just move on already. Maybe if I have some sugar, it'll wake me up, and I'll stop saying stupid shit without realizing it.

"...So does that mean that you'd like to have me? Y'know, since I'm so cute, sweet, pretty and all. Your words, not mine. You horny rascal."

Touka, please, I beg of you—just let this go. I already want to crawl under a rock and die enough right now. Why'd she have to twist my words like that?

"I thought I was referring to the pancakes, not you," I retort with a poker face.

"Oh really?" she whispers as she starts hitting my leg with her tiptoes.

"The hell are you doing? Can you not kick me, please?" I snap. Her playful hits under the table have some force behind them, to the point that it hurts.

"You're such a meanie, Senpai. But if you don't want me to, then I'll stop," she teases. She stops kicking me, but now she's running her feet along my legs. I can tell she's taken her shoes off from the way it feels.

"Come on, that tickles," I say.

"Oh really? Then shake my feet off if you don't like it. You can do that much, can't you?"

Okay, now she's really pissing me off. If she wants me to grab her feet so bad, then I'll do it. I reach down, grab her leg—

"Eep!" she yelps. Her face turns crimson again, and she quickly retreats from my leg. There's a long, awkward silence between us. We look at each other, but we can't bring ourselves to say anything.

"So your perverted ass just touched my legs, and you don't even have anything to say about them? I see how it is, Senpai," she grumbles with her head turned the other way.

“I mean, if you want some feedback—they’re slender, but surprisingly soft. It felt like I was touching a mattress. They feel totally different than my own legs, at least.”

Instead of responding with a snappy retort, like she normally would, Touka starts tearing up instead. She cries out, “I didn’t mean it like that! You’re supposed to get embarrassed, okay?! That’s what I was expecting. Not some play-by-play about how my legs feel! That totally sounded like something a creepy perv would say!”

What was she expecting from me? Doesn’t she know me by now? I don’t give a shit about saying what’s on my mind. But I’ll admit, I went a little too far with my answer just now. I bow my head and say, “Yeah, you’re right. I apologize.”

I didn’t want her to have a bad time here. Not only did I screw up once with the stuff about her being cute, but I also made her feel uncomfortable with the whole footsies thing. Yeah, that was my bad. Her face is a deep red right now, and her eyes are watery; she’s obviously embarrassed by what I just did.

“I’m really sorry. I won’t touch you ever again,” I assure her.

“I-I didn’t mean that either, okay?! I’m just embarra—I mean, surprised by what you did! I don’t mind you touching me at all, Senpai! That’s not what I meant, so don’t worry!” she stutters.

“But you...”

“Welp! About time to order those pancakes! We’ll split them, okay?!” she quickly interrupts me before I can say anything else. She calls the waiter over, avoiding any and all eye contact with me. Once he leaves, she mumbles, “I... I was just surprised, all right? Nothing else. Don’t worry about it.”

Okay, then I won’t bring it up anymore. The pancakes arrive quickly, and Touka shifts her attention to them.

“Woow! They look delicious! I have to take a pic!” she happily exclaims. She pulls out her phone and takes a picture of the plate. Then, in a joking tone, she turns to me and says, “Okay, Senpai—it’s time to feed each other these pancakes! Y’know, just like a real couple!”

I’ll admit it—she’s cute when she does stuff like this.

“Yeahhh... thanks, but no thanks,” I quickly respond.

“Huh? No way! Remember when a certain somebody asked us to ‘show that we’re the real deal?’ We have to do this kinda stuff so it becomes second nature! Who knows when something like that will pop up again? Or are you trying to say you won’t have any performance anxiety?”

She blurts all of this so quickly that it takes me a moment to catch what she says. Damn, she’s really pushing for this.

“Didn’t we practice enough on the roof that day when you made me lunch?” I reply. I have a flashback to when she stuffed some food from the lunch box into my mouth. It didn’t feel very “loving” to me, considering it nearly ended in me choking to death, but hey.

“Come on, that didn’t count. Isn’t it obvious?!” she replies.

“Wait, really?” You’ve gotta be kidding me.

“Listen up! Just because that was practice doesn’t mean it counts! We need to seriously train for this kind of stuff. That way, if we ever get another hater asking us to prove our undying love for each other, we can do something like this and totally rub it in their stupid faces! That’s why we have to do it, okay? So we can do it in front of others without any issues! Got it?!”

Damn, she’s left me no choice but to comply. She’s pressuring me super hard. What am I supposed to respond with after that grand speech?

“I’ll take your silence as a yes!” she says quickly. She grabs a fork and a knife, cuts a piece of pancake, extends it my way, and coaches, “Say ‘Aaaaah!’”

I look around to check the people around us. It looks like no one’s paying any attention to us, which is a huge relief. I’ll just go along with her request and finish as quickly as I can.

I bite into the pancake. Instantly, its warm and fluffy texture fills my mouth. I think it’s a little on the sweet side, but still tasty.

“Okay, Senpai—now it’s your turn to feed me!” she says while handing the fork over to me.

I have no choice. I reluctantly nod and cut off another piece of the pancake; I

present it to her while our eyes lock. Her cheeks immediately flush. She opens her mouth slightly and delicately eats the morsel. I can't help but stare at her lips while she's eating. Damn, this is really embarrassing. I need to chill.

"I'm sorry, Touka, but I don't think I can bring myself to do this in front of people again, not gonna lie," I manage to whisper with my remaining strength.

"I'm so flustered that I can't even taste the pancake. I guess you're right. Let's just not do this for the time being," she agrees while averting her gaze.

"Okay, that's good to hear. Besides, I don't think anyone would ask us to pull something like this to prove our relationship. The only person who's done something remotely similar has been Hasaki. Well, then again, if she did that, it's not entirely out of the question for her to ask us to do this, too."

Touka's smile vanishes the moment Hasaki's name is mentioned. Her face turns into a cold, expressionless mask.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"I just remembered that friend of yours, Natsuo; the one you were talking about the other day," she replies.

Right. Now that I think about it, Hasaki hasn't returned to our study meets since I brought him up. I find it weird that she brought him up when Hasaki became the topic of discussion, though.

"You want to meet with him again, don't you, Senpai?" she asks.

"Yeah, I do."

"Even if he's changed?" she asks. Her tone is incredibly serious. Undaunted, I nod without a word.

"I see. Okay, got it. I think I might know Natsuo, actually. I'll try my luck and ask if he feels the same way," she says.

I remember the last time I asked about him, she and Ike said they had their reasons for staying hush-hush on the whole thing; I'm honestly surprised she'd go this far for me. If she really does know who Natsuo is and convinces him to meet me again, I'd be more than delighted.

"I guess he's still your friend, after all. Obviously you'd want to meet him," she

mumbles to herself. She turns to me and exclaims, “But! There’s something I want you to promise me!”

“Huh? A promise?” I ask.

“Yup. I think it’d great for you to make more friends and all that, but... remember that I’m your girlfriend, got it?! I forbid you to hit on other girls. Promise,” she commands while glaring at me with misty eyes.

Well, I’ve already made friends with Hasaki, so I guess she doesn’t want me hanging around too many girls. It could affect our “relationship,” after all. Considering how Natsuo’s probably a lady killer by now, and I don’t exactly mind hanging around girls, she probably wants to make sure I don’t pick up a real girlfriend in the process. Not gonna lie, though—even if we’re fake, hearing how she’s talking right now—treating “us” like we’re genuine—makes my heart skip a beat every time. Even if it’s just for a brief moment.

“No worries, Touka. You’re the only one for me,” I respond.

“Damn! Okay, you don’t need to sweet-talk me or anything. As long as you keep your promise, I’m fine,” she says while staring a hole into the floor.

So she’s embarrassed by my reply, but not at her own request? I swear, she’s something else. Her face is completely red, and she’s still staring intently at the floor; I guess I’ll cut her some slack for now.

Chapter 10: The Exams Commence!

After my first ever set of group study sessions last week, exam time finally rolls around. We're being tested on several subjects, but I think I'm up to the task thanks to Ike's help.

Most of the questions are pretty challenging, but every now and then, I end up coming across a question or two that makes me realize, "Hey! I definitely reviewed this with Ike!"

A week of gruesome tests passes, and we finally just finished our last one. Classes are now over, and everyone's preparing to leave. The classroom is buzzing with excitement.

"Hey, Haruma, what were your answers for today's test?"

"Yo! I wanna know, as well!"

I'm at my seat and packing up my things as I watch the scene unfold in front of me: Ike's near the teacher's desk, and he's being swarmed by other guys who are tripping over themselves to know his answers.

"Guys, I don't know if I'm the go-to person to check your answers. For all we know, I could be wrong on a lot of them."

"Yeah, sure. My ass, you're gonna be wrong. Anyway, if, for some reason, you failed a question, it'd be because the teacher screwed up!"

Ike's being hounded by the others, so he finally gives in and starts cross-checking with everyone else. As he recites every question and his answers, shouts of joy and frustration echo throughout the classroom.

"Whaaat?! So the right answer for number three on our Modern Japanese exam was actually B?! ...Oh, so that's how you're supposed to read it. I never would've thought of that. Ike, my man, you're a goddamn genius."

“That’s how you’re supposed to do the last math question, huh? How did I mess up on such a simple calculation? I swear.”

“Our history exam had so many questions that we barely covered in the lectures, and you’re telling me you probably got them all right? How’d you do it?”

Everyone’s discussing the questions and giving their piece about how smart Ike is. It feels so scripted at times that I can’t help but smile.

“It’s not the end of the world if you didn’t nail everything, guys. I’m pretty sure we had some questions that could’ve easily appeared in a college entrance exam. To be honest, these exams were tough.”

He’s so modest sometimes that it leaves everyone starstruck. Everyone fawns over him; they look at him with trust and even something close to reverence. It doesn’t surprise me one bit, though—he was born for this.

“Damn, looks like Haruma is the MVP after exams. What about you, Tomoki-kun? How did you do?” Hasaki suddenly approaches my seat and inquires out of the blue. My social life’s been on life support this week due to the tests, so it’s nice to be able to finally have a conversation with someone.

“I think I did a lot better than last year. It’s all thanks to Ike,” I say.

“Oh, really? That’s good to hear,” she answers rather flippantly.

I shift my attention to the crowd surrounding our main character and ask Hasaki, “You’re not gonna check your answers with him?”

“I could... but since he tends to always be right, sometimes it’s better if I don’t know where I made mistakes. It could ruin the afternoon for me, you know?” she says with a smile. That makes sense—her grades are pretty average, not outstanding.

“You think you had a tough time on these or something?” I ask.

She averts eyes and answers with a shrug, “Yeah. I couldn’t concentrate at all, so I’m pretty sure I’ll end up doing pretty poorly.”

“Oh. Damn, that sucks,” I reply.

“Senpaaai! Let’s go home together!” a voice calls from the class entrance. To nobody’s surprise, it’s Touka. She quickly spots me and rushes over.

“Good job this week! You too, Hasaki-senpai!” she says with a smile.

“Mhm. Yeah, same for you,” Hasaki answers in the same uninterested tone. She quickly follows up with, “Okay, guess I’ll head to tennis club, then.”

“Huh?” Touka blurts out.

Touka and I are a bit startled by her reaction. I get Hasaki not being in the mood to be sociable and trying to escape as quickly as possible, but why? Did something happen? She takes a deep breath and hesitantly says, “Um, so... I actually have a tennis match coming up, and I was wondering if you two would like to come root for me?”

I bet Touka will say no.

“Okay, sure! Yuuji-senpai and I will definitely be there to support you!” Touka cheerily says.

“...Thanks, that’s a relief to hear. It’d make me very happy if you showed up,” Hasaki replies. Is it just me, or did she not sound too happy about it?

“Okay, I’ll be going now. Bye-bye!” Hasaki says. She waves at us and leaves the class. As she’s heading out, I tell her to take care, but she doesn’t even turn around. Huh.

“You sure you’re cool with going to the match?” I ask Touka once I make sure Hasaki’s gone. They don’t get along very well right now, so I’m sorta curious about why Touka accepted her offer.

“It’s fine. We should go,” she says while looking at the class door. Maybe she’s reconsidering her stance on her ex-friend? I can’t read minds, so while I hope that’s the case, Touka can be quite unpredictable. What is she looking to get out of all this? I wish I could tell.

“Anyways, let’s just leave. I don’t wanna stay here,” she says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Sure, let’s go,” I respond. We get up, leave school, and head home.



I had a dream last night. It was probably influenced by yesterday's events. I remember Hasaki and Touka were in the dream. For some reason, they were feeding each other their homemade lunches as a way to make up. Anyway, I ended up waking up earlier than usual. I get on the train earlier than normal, and as I'm heading toward school, I happen across Makiri-sensei. Our eyes lock for a brief moment, but she quickly averts her gaze. She's probably still embarrassed about what happened the other day. I feel her—I mean, I'm still pretty embarrassed about it myself.

This is different, though—she's an adult, not just some blushing schoolgirl, so I can't bring myself to ignore this. She shakes her head a couple of times as if conflicted about something. Finally, she looks at me and says, "Good morning, Tomoki-kun. You woke up bright and early today, I see." She sounds very on-edge right now. She's not as composed as she tends to be.

"Good morning. Yeah. I woke up earlier than usual, so I decided to come in earlier. Why not?" I reply. Okay, I can't fault her; I'm feeling a little tense, too. I'd be lying if I said otherwise.

"Sleep is important, so be sure to not skimp on it, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

Man, this is so awkward. I keep remembering what happened that day. What do I say? How should I apologize for it?

"By the way....," she suddenly says with a smile, "I heard your results this year have been pretty good."

Thank god she changes the subject. She seems calmer than before, and that manages to calm me down a little, as well.

"Yeah, it definitely felt like I did better this year. Good thing Ike gave me a hand last week," I reply, trying to return to my normal self.

"Oh, he did? He got excellent grades—as per usual—so I guess you both worked hard for them."

"How do you know my grades, though?" I ask. The only reason I can think of

is the teachers spreading yet another rumor about me—probably speculating that I got those grades by cheating or something like that. Maybe that’s how she found out.

“It’s not that I have favorites or anything... but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t care about you as much as the rest,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I ask. Maybe I got into some trouble without knowing about it, and she’s trying to offer her usual help? I’m pretty worried now. It must be written all over my face, because when she sees my expression, she quickly drops her smile and mirrors my look.

“W-Wait! What I meant is... It’s not what you think, all right?!” she stammers. Her cheeks are pink, and her eyes look a little glossy. I think she’s trying too hard to read me. Seeing her this worried is pretty embarrassing, though.

“...I got it,” I mumble.

“Did you really understand what I meant, though?” she asks, still nervous. I don’t—can’t—reply. After a moment of silence, she probably realizes I won’t answer and continues with, “Oh, well. Okay then.”

The pause resumes and stretches on before she thinks of another topic. “By the way, about what happened in the student counseling room the other day...,” she starts. I knew this was gonna come up sooner or later. I nod to acknowledge her, and she says, “You helped me back then. Thank you for that. Did you injure yourself? I never ended up asking if you were okay.”

“I’m fine; no injuries or anything like that. I’m sturdy, so I can take a few hits,” I reply.

“I see. Good to know, then,” she says with a smile on her face.

“Are you okay, though? Like, did you hit yourself somewhere when you fell?” I ask.

“No, I didn’t. That’s all thanks to you,” she responds.

“Good to know, then,” I echo. I was worried about her getting hurt in the fall, but it’s a relief to hear that she’s fine. I let out a big exhale, and she smiles

awkwardly. After another strained silence, she speaks up again.

“It’d be nice if we could, uh, forget about what happened back there.”

“No problem,” I say. Like hell I will, though—how can I forget having her draped over me? I’ll try not to think about it as much, if there’s anything I can do.

“Thanks, I really appreciate it,” she says with the same forced smile. “Did my advice work, by the way? I mean, about the problems you talked about back then.”

Oh, right—I asked her for advice on getting Kana and Hasaki to make up. Let’s see...

“Hm, well... they definitely don’t get along too well right now, but I did as you recommended. They’ve been talking, and I think it’s slowly working. Slowly, but surely,” I reply. Take Touka accepting Hasaki’s invitation, for example. I think that’s a great start. I’m sure it’ll only get better between the two of them. They just need more time and opportunities to talk.

“That’s great to hear. Just don’t be too optimistic about the whole thing. You have to watch over them to make sure nothing goes wrong, okay?”

“Yep. Like I said, they still don’t get along very well; but I’ll do what I can to help them reconcile.”

It’s like what she said last time—their relationship might have improved slightly, but there’s still a long way to go before they can truly be friends again. I don’t think I can do much in the grand scheme of things, but as long as I can assist in any way, I’ll continue to do so.

“I hope you can continue on helping them without any issues,” she says.

“Thanks,” I answer. I don’t really know what else to say.

“Anyway, I need to go now. Do your best today, as usual,” she says.

“I’ll try.”

She walks off, turns a corner in the hallway, and disappears from view. I stand still for a bit and zone out, going back through our conversation. After a few seconds, I come back to my senses and head straight to class. As I enter, I glance

at the clock. I spent a good chunk of time talking with Makiri-sensei, but there's still time until school starts.

As I look at the sunlight piercing through the windows and chill alone, I realize that maybe the early bird does get the worm, after all.

Chapter 11: Kana's Match

“Oof, it’s blazing hot today,” Touka says, covering her eyes to block out the sun.

“Yeah, you’re not wrong. It’s kinda amazing that tennis matches are actually being held on a day like this.”

“Mhm. I’d be worried about getting sunburnt if I were them... Actually, I gotta get myself some sunscreen for later,” she sighs as she crosses her arms.

It’s the weekend. As we’d promised Hasaki, we’ve come to the athletic park to watch her match. I’m kinda surprised she invited us in the first place, but this is a great chance for her to make some progress with Touka. I wish I could understand how Touka feels about all of this, though—why did she so readily accept her invitation the other day? I can’t imagine her wanting to cheer Hasaki on, so I honestly don’t have a clue. Personally, I’d like to think that, deep down, Touka also has the desire to talk to Hasaki again; that’s just me trying to be optimistic about the whole thing, though.

“Oh yeah! I wanted to ask you something, actually—which do you prefer, Senpai? Tanned girls, or pale skin?” she suddenly asks me, her eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“I don’t really mind either. As long as her personality’s good, I don’t care much about her looks.”

Her excitement quickly turns into disappointment. She says, “Okay, then, let me rephrase the question—would you be interested in seeing me with a tan?”

Seeing her with a tan? Hm, let me picture it... “I don’t know if it would suit you, but I wouldn’t mind seeing it,” I manage to answer.

“Lame. That’s such a non-answer. Just say yes or no. It’s that easy! If it’s for you, I wouldn’t mind going through with it!”

I mean, I’d like to tell her to do whatever the hell she feels like, but I’m not sure. I’d be lying if I said I’m not curious, but I don’t know if it’d be a good idea to decide things for her. I’d rather stay neutral. Then again...

“Honestly, I think you look pretty good as you are. A tan wouldn’t suit you, in my opinion,” I finally say.

She notices that I’m looking at her; she quickly moves her arms behind her, blushes, and begins to tear up. “W-What did you just say?! So that’s how you s-see me, huh?! Y-You nasty-ass perv! You’ve been trying to flirt with me nonstop lately!” she stammers in one single breath. It’s kind of impressive to hear. I was only trying to compliment her, but I guess you could interpret it that way. Whatever, I’ll just shut up.

“Sorry, Touka. Wasn’t trying to creep you out,” I apologize. I should bear in mind that I’m still a social reject and that I don’t know how to talk or relate to other people. I feel terrible now. I think Touka notices my depressed expression, because she suddenly clears her throat to regain my attention.

“You didn’t weird me out or anything, okay? I’m fully aware that I’m super cute! I totally get why you feel obligated to compliment me and all that. If you don’t want me to get a tan, then I won’t. I forgive you, okay? Don’t look so bummed out.”

She turns her face—which is still somewhat red—away to avoid looking me in the eyes. Wow, she noticed how I was feeling and tried to console me. She’s truly a good person.

“No problem. It’s not like constantly gawking at you was in my plans today, so we’re good,” I say.

“Didn’t I tell you I don’t mind that happening, though?” she quickly replies.

Well, I’ll try to avoid any situations that can be misinterpreted either way.

“Hey, you two came after all!” someone suddenly shouts out to us. It’s Ike.

“Oh, you’re here, too?” I say.

“You’re kidding, right? When’d you even leave the house? Man, you’re like a ninja or something,” Touka jokes.

“You didn’t notice because you’ve always got Yuuji on the brain. It’s not like you usually know when I’m there or not, anyways,” he replies.

Touka’s face goes crimson, and she glares directly at him. “Huh? How dare you, you frickin’ creep. Yeah, you heard me. Don’t talk to me ever again, ew. And stop spouting stuff like that in front of Yuuji-senpai. First, it’s gross as hell. Second, it’s a total lie,” she spits back as quickly as possible.

“Sorry about my sister. Sometimes, she can be a pain in the ass,” Ike says with a sardonic smile.

“Not at all. She’s actually super caring when she’s around me, so…” I say.

“Yeah, you tell ‘im! Of course I’d treat you way better than my shitty brother over here, Senpai! Right?” she butts in.

Didn’t she just accuse me of harassing her a few moments ago? Whatever. I’m curious about the fact that she uses the same “jokes” around Ike, though. I wish I could help them get along better, but what can I do? I feel they need time, just like with Hasaki, but that’s a whole ‘nother story.

“What’s wrong, Senpai? You look gloomy all of a sudden,” she asks.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about how you two get along in your own special way.”

Ike and Touka look at each other, surprised, then break into a smile.

“Yep. All thanks to you, Senpai.”

“What she said. It’s all because of you, dude.”

Whatever happened between these two and Hasaki had to have occurred back when they all used to hang out with each other. I can’t even begin to fathom what happened, or what to do about it. I’ve been brainstorming, but nothing’s popped out so far. Maybe I should ask them directly? I guess it’s worth a shot.

“Where’s Hasaki-senpai, by the way?” Touka suddenly asks before I get the chance to follow up with my question. Oh well, I’ll ask them later.

“She’s over there playing in one of the courts. See?” Ike says as he points to one of the tennis courts.

Sure enough, there’s Kana. But she’s a complete 180 from her usual self—her demeanor is completely serious. She tracks the ball with a keen intensity, and her movements are cool and calculated. She’s ready for the ball to come to her, and whenever she hits it, she lets out a loud shout. Honestly, seeing her like that makes me think she’s pretty cool. It’s amazing; I can’t take my eyes off her.

“Aren’t you ogling her a little too much, Senpai?” Touka huffs, glaring murderously at me.

“You have an issue with me looking at her playing, or what?”

She doesn’t answer out loud, but she continues to scowl at me. What did I do to piss her off? What’s wrong with her? I wish she’d just tell me directly. She takes a deep breath and says, “Okay, my bad. I’m sorry I was annoyed that you were watching her prance about in that super short skirt with her tits bouncing around all over the place. Yup, I was totally out of line... Psych! How about you stop being so horny, huh?!”

She’ll calm down eventually. I’ll just go back to watching Hasaki. Actually, now that she mentions it... yeah, her boobs definitely sway every time she swings her racket. And her skirt does flutter around in a way that’s a little too stimulating. Okay, I’ll stop looking. At first, I was looking at her because she looked cool, but Touka’s thoroughly ruined the experience for me. All I can think about now is boobs and short skirts. Fuck my life.

I look back at Touka to check on her, but she’s still giving me the stink eye.

“I wasn’t looking at her like that,” I mutter.

“Bullshit. You were totally undressing her with your eyes. It’s okay, though—it’s my fault for not knowing you get such a hard-on for short skirts. Should’ve worn one myself so you wouldn’t have to get your fix elsewhere. My bad! Wasn’t expecting you to have such weird fetishes!” she says while slapping at her legs fitted in tight jeans.

What am I even supposed to say in this situation? Maybe I should just go with my specialty: staying silent.

“I pretty much know how your relationship works now, but is this how you two usually flirt with each other?” Ike suddenly asks with a forced smile.

It’s not like we were flirting or anything like that... But yeah, this is usually how we interact with each other.

“Yeah, this is the norm for us,” I answer.

“Oh, I see. By the way, Yuuji—if you wanna call me your brother-in-law, I don’t mind.”

“Huh?” I blurt out. Okay, that was way over the line, man.

“I guess it’s still too early for me to say that,” he quickly answers with a smug expression.

Sorry, Ike. It can’t exactly be too early because we’re faking everything in the first place. Touka doesn’t look very amused by his joke either. She shouts, “What’s wrong with you, shithead? There you go again being creepy. Like, what’re you even talking about? Just go to hell already.” After her little tirade, she falls completely silent. Her face is bright red, a sure-fire indicator that she’s pissed. Oh shit.

“Damn, Touka. I never would’ve expected you to act so cute in front of your boyfriend,” Ike jokes, grinning from ear to ear.

Huh? Cute? Is he implying that she’s embarrassed or something? Isn’t she super angry right now, or am I imagining things? I’m completely speechless right now. And here I thought I could read people decently. I guess I’m no match for the protagonist, after all.

Suddenly, everyone in the tennis court shouts and attracts our attention.

“Oh, looks like Hasaki’s match is over.”

What’s the score? Damn, Hasaki completely crushed her opponent. Looks as though she hasn’t lost a single game yet. Everyone around us is clamoring over her victory.

“Her last ace was unbelievable!”

“I’m telling you, nobody in the world could counter that.”

Everyone around us is commenting on Hasaki's recent play. So she finished the match with an ace? No wonder everyone shouted. I'm sorta bummed I missed the majority of the match, actually. Hasaki and her opponent bow to each other and leave the court. She's wiping her sweat off with a towel, but she doesn't actually seem tired at all. Anyway, her match is over, so let's go and talk to her.

"Hey, Kana, good match. You're still looking pretty energetic," Ike greets her.

She turns around. "Hey, Haruma! I'm actually feeling pretty worn out... Maybe not physically, but definitely mentally! Oh hey, Tomoki-kun! You came, too!"

"Yo," I reply.

"I'm here too, you know." Touka huffs. Hah, she didn't notice Touka. That's a riot.

"Yeah! Thanks for coming along, Touka-chan!"

"You were pretty phenomenal in that match, by the way. You're stronger than I thought. It was like, damn," I say as I approach her.

"O-Okay. Thanks..." she stammers while taking a step back. Oops, I always forget that she's still scared of my face. I need to stop doing this.

"I'm sorry, Tomoki-kun—I'm all sweaty right now, so I'd rather keep my distance, if you know what I mean... It's a little embarrassing," she says, blushing. Oh, that makes me feel a little better, then; I'm glad it wasn't because I freaked her out.

"Oh, okay. No problem. I didn't notice that, to be honest. Then again, you were all over the place, so it's no wonder. I'm serious, you looked super cool while you played," I say.

"R-Really? Wow, thanks! That makes me happy. Hehehe..."

"Yeah, he's especially into your tits and ass swinging around in that short skirt," Touka adds in the coldest voice she can muster.

Screw you, Touka. Why you gotta be so mad?

"Whaaat?!" Hasaki shouts. She quickly covers her chest with one arm and

holds her skirt down with the other. Her face is bright red, and she's trembling slightly as she accuses me, "How can you look at me like that when you've already got a girlfriend as cute as Touka-chan?"

I gotta tell her that this is a misunderstanding.

"No way! I'm the only one for Senpai, right?" Touka exclaims.

"O-Oh yeah, true. Aww, jeez! You startled me!" Hasaki says. She clears her throat, takes a deep breath, and continues, "I'm going to go cool down for a bit, so I'll see you guys later!" With that, she quickly heads back toward the court.

"We'll cheer you on in the next match!" I shout after her. She turns around and happily exclaims, "Okay! I'd be very happy if you guys do! I'll do my best!" She then returns to her serious persona and returns to the court.

I'll say it again—seeing her get so into her matches gives her this mysteriously-cool quality. I don't know how to describe it.



Hasaki's second match commences. Ike, Touka, and I sit in a row and prepare to watch. Hasaki starts the match's service. She delivers the ball with incredible speed, but her opponent somehow manages to propel it back to her side. She quickly counters, though, and manages to score her first point of the match.

"I heard she was pretty good at tennis, but I never would've expected her to be so aggressive. She's a beast at this," I note.

"These are first seed matches, so I'm not surprised," Ike replies.

"Damn. So what's her opponent's rank?"

"I think she's the same age as us. Last I checked, she was the 16th best in the country."

"Whoa, that's pretty amazing."

Her opponent seems to have pretty much grasped Kana's playstyle, but even if

she's doing better than before, Kana's still levels above her. The match continues until Kana wraps up game one.

"That was flawless. She hasn't lost a single point yet."

"Well, in tennis, the one who serves is the one with an advantage. Hasaki-senpai has always been good at serving. I still find it impressive that she hasn't lost a single point yet, though," Touka comments.

"You sure know your stuff about tennis."

"Back when I was in elementary school, I played it, too. I bet you'd looove seeing me in one of those tiny tennis skirts, huh?" she says with an impish smile.

"Meh, couldn't care less," I reply.

"Oh wow, what a shame. I wouldn't have minded buying one and wearing it for you if you actually wanted me to. Such a tragedy that you'll let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity pass you by!"

What? She'd be actually willing to wear one if I asked her sincerely?

"You two sure get along well," Ike suddenly says. He's been watching our exchange silently up until now.

"Huh? There's no need for you to state the obvious, dude. Yuuji-senpai and I are the bestest couple ever! Right, Senpai?" she exclaims while looking at me. Ike follows with a smile. This is pretty embarrassing.

"Kana looks more fired up than usual today, though," Ike whispers as he returns to gazing at the court.

I follow his eyes to the court. She seems to have her standard intensity while she's in the middle of a match, but it's like Ike says—there's something else going on. It's easy to tell the difference between her face and her opponent's—Hasaki is clearly driving the other girl into a corner with this match. Well, nothing's been decided for sure, but that's how the match has been playing out so far. Her control over her opponent's service balls is amazing. She manages to counter every one of them almost flawlessly.

"I guess it's good for her to be so focused, but I'm worried that it'll affect her later on down the line," Ike says with a worried tone.

“Maybe we should ask her about it once the match is over?” I suggest.

“Agreed.”

“It’s sooo hot, though! I’m gonna go and grab a drink. Do you want something, Senpai?” Touka asks as she stands up.

I feel her. It’s pretty hot today, so I appreciate her getting me something to drink.

“Sure, I’ll have some tea,” I say.

“I’m fine, so don’t bring me anything,” Ike adds.

“It’s okay, I wasn’t planning on bringing you anything, anyways. Be back in a bit!”



Hasaki keeps on racking up points while Touka’s gone. So far the score is 4-1. She’s only lost one game so far.

“Touka’s not back yet?” I say. I’m getting pretty worried about her; she left a while ago.

“Not from the looks of it. The vending machine isn’t that far, either,” Ike says. He sounds perplexed.

Touka’s really cute, and this place is full of other teenage guys today... Maybe she wound up in some trouble? Maybe one of the guys roaming around tried to pick her up.

“I’ll go and see what’s up,” I say as I stand up.

“Sounds good.”

I head toward the nearest vending machine. That’s where I figure she would’ve gone. And there she is. Sure enough, she’s gotten herself in a pickle.

“Come on, Touka-chan! Weren’t we besties back in the day?! Introduce us to Haruma-san, pretty please with a cherry on top?”

“We’re being serious here, you know? I think meeting here was, like, actually fate! No joke!”

She’s not surrounded by a bunch of horny dudes, though—girls in tennis apparel are swarming around her instead. I guess they’re old friends of hers that are pretty hell-bent on getting a chance with Haruma.

“Wouldn’t it be better if you girls to just talk to him directly? I know he’d feel happier if you did that!” she replies. I can’t see her face right now since I’m behind her, but she’s not too happy judging by her stiff tone. The two girls don’t seem to notice, however. They exchange a look and continue to pester her.

“Wow, Touka-chan! Don’t be such a meanie.”

“Yeah, c’mon! How can you expect us to just go up and talk to someone that hot? I definitely do want to get close to him, though!”

“Yup! Sooo pretty please? How ’bout this—we’ll invite you to a cake buffet the next time we hang out as our way of saying thanks! Pleaaase?!”

Looks like neither of them is willing to back down. If I don’t get involved, things could definitely escalate. Then again, this is Touka we’re talking about—I’m sure she knows a way out of this, right? But on the other hand, I don’t think me standing here and watching is the greatest idea. I’ll come to the rescue. The two girls have already noticed me approaching them—as evident by their rapidly-paling faces—but Touka hasn’t yet.

“Hey, Touka, I’ve been looking all over for you,” I call out to her.

The two girls are shocked when I say her name, and they begin to tremble. Touka, in comparison, quickly turns around with a bright smile.

“Hey, Yuuji-senpai! You’ve been looking for me? Aww, I’m just the happiest right now!”

The girls still can’t believe what’s going on, but Touka doesn’t even seem to care about them anymore. She’s completely focused on me now; she locks one of her arms in mine with the same beaming smile.

“Sorry, girls. My boyfriend needs my attention, so we’ll have to talk about that later, okay?”

The girls nod and gulp at the same time.

“O-Of course! Nice yaku—I mean, gangs—I mean, uh... Nice dangerous-looking guy you got there!”

“Y-Yeah! He definitely looks menacing!”

“Anyways, see ya!” they both shout as they run away. Once the two of them are out of sight, Touka sighs and says, “You’re a real lifesaver, Senpai. I didn’t even remember their names, but they were apparently old friends of mine. I happened to run into them, and things got pretty awkward. So yeah, thanks.”

She doesn’t even remember their names? Damn, that’s harsh...

“Glad to know I helped,” I reply.

“Yup. You sure did, Senpai! As a reward, I’ll let you enjoy me being wrapped around you a little while longer!” she says with a smug expression.

“What? It’s already so hot without your arm, though. Can’t you reward me some other way?”

I bet she’s sweltering, as well, so this isn’t the greatest idea. Her demeanor does a total 180, and she frowns. “Oh, okay...” she says as she peels herself off of me.

I know what I did is stupid, and I’m sure I hurt her feelings, but it’s pretty hot. Linking arms isn’t the best idea right now.

“I’ve always thought it, but you can actually be pretty patient, Touka. Like, you rarely get angry or lose your cool when you have to endure shit like that.”

Take what happened back there, for example. She’s always getting these kinds of requests, but she constantly manages to keep her composure. I don’t know how she manages not to lose her shit after a while. I know I’d be sick to death if I were in her shoes.

“Yep, just like now. If only you knew how patient I am,” she grumbles while giving me a dirty look.

I’ve never really given it much thought, but she has to endure similar scenarios on a pretty much daily basis. I need to be more mindful of her circumstances from now on. “Wait a second! How long have you been here for? What did you hear?!” she suddenly blurts out, looking at me aghast.

“Uh, I think I spotted you when they were begging you to introduce them to Ike... So around three minutes or so?” I answer.

“Oh really? Okay, I wasn’t expecting that!”

“What do you mean?”

“I was pissed ‘cause of our earlier discussion, not the bit where they asked me to meet my brother. But that was before you came, so that’s why I said that!”

“Really?”

She nods and says, “I hate it when other people treat me as ‘Haruma’s sister,’ as if I’m nothing else besides that. You just see me for who I am, so my bad mood’s totally gone!”

“Oh, I see,” I say. Nice to know I helped out, then. “So why were you so angry with them?”

“Huh? You really wanna know?” she says surprised.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to.”

She shakes her head and responds, “The girl with the ponytail is about to play against Hasaki-senpai in a bit. And while we were talking, she went on this, like, big tangent about Hasaki-senpai being gifted at tennis, and how she’d never reach her level, no matter how hard she worked. The worst part was when she tried to tell me ‘You understand me, right, Touka-chan?’ That pissed me the hell off.”

I imagine that girl didn’t have any bad intentions, but I know how much Touka hates hearing stuff like that. She’s always trying her best so she can be recognized as her brother’s equal, but to no avail. It’s definitely frustrating, so I can understand her anger when someone else brings up the subject.

“It’s not even about that specific comment—it’s about how she’d already admitted defeat before the match had even started. I mean, of course you’d lose to someone who’s more dedicated to the sport. And then she tried to ‘relate’ to me, as if I were a sore loser like her. That’s what ticked me off.” She pauses to take a deep breath and then continues in a near whisper, “But I bet you think I’m the asshole for thinking that.” She closes her eyes and scratches her cheek.

I nod. “Yeah, you are. But that’s what I like about you.”

Her eyes snap open, and she looks at me surprised. “Th-There you go again flirting with me. You’re a lost cause, Senpai,” she stammers. “Then again, I don’t think I’m the most qualified person to bad-mouth them, anyways.”

“What’s that mean?” I ask.

“I think I mentioned this before, but it has to do with what happened between me and Hasaki-senpai growing apart. It was... not cool on my end,” she says. She takes a short pause and then continues, “I have an inferiority complex when it comes to her. I’ll tell you what happened, but don’t laugh, got it?”

“Fine by me. Wanna sit down and talk about it?”

Standing around in the sun isn’t doing us any favors, so we should probably find a place to chill. I spy a couple of benches nearby, so I point them out to her. We head over, and once we’re seated, she resumes the conversation.

“Back when I was in elementary school, I played tennis from 3rd grade to 5th grade. My brother also played tennis back then. And since I didn’t want to lose to him, I followed in his path and started doing it, as well.” She pauses for a bit, fidgets slightly, and continues, “Actually, I got pretty good at it. And because I was pretty good, I put more time and effort into it. I ended up attending a bunch of tennis events during my first year, and I did well in them. I was planning to keep at it and show everyone how good I was... up until Hasaki-senpai started to play, too.”

She stops again and stares blankly off into the distance. She’s probably recalling what happened. After a while, she continues, “At first she was... pretty terrible, to be honest. We still got along well, and I actually helped her out with a lot of stuff. She gave it her all and slowly but surely got better at it. Seeing her improving motivated me, too. Like, I wanted to keep practicing and improve myself, y’know?”

She curls her hand into a fist and says, “It happened at the final event during our final year in elementary school. Up until then, I’d never lost a single match against her... but that was the first time I lost. I didn’t win a single game, and that shocked me. She started playing later than me, but she’d gotten better, even

after all that I'd invested into it. It was like she'd caught up to me instantly, and that made me super bitter toward her. But she really likes tennis. I know how hard she's worked to get to where she is now. So I ended up acknowledging my defeat and totally gave up. I didn't even bother to keep practicing to try and get better than her. I just... I just gave up."

I think this is the first time I've seen her like this—she's so downcast.

"And that's when I basically gave up on tennis. She didn't take a liking to the fact that I had quit, and we got into a fight. I still remember what she told me—'How can you leave after losing a single match?! Just practice more, and you can have your revenge! What's the point of all the effort you've made otherwise?!'"

She looks at me to gauge my reaction and then keeps talking, "I just didn't feel like continuing, though. I ended up yelling back, 'How can I expect you to understand that no matter how much I practice, I'll never surpass you?!'"

This was during the time she was struggling with her inferiority issues as "Haruma's little sister," so that's why she was so quick to lose her will to continue. Hasaki probably didn't know her circumstances well enough to understand, and it caused a massive misunderstanding.

"Ever since then, we've never really talked much. She talks about tennis constantly, and whenever she does, I just feel terrible. It only brings up all those crappy feelings again, so I just want to get away from all that. I just want to run away whenever that happens. Anyways, that's it. I bet I've bored you to death with this story, right, Senpai?"

In the end, I think they both lost something. I gotta be straight with her on this one. "Yeah, not gonna lie, that was quite the anticlimactic story," I say.

"Figures. It's such a boring, stupid story," she replies with a little bitterness. She looks like she's on the brink of tears right now. Shit, I think I was too inconsiderate; I've never seen her act this way. How am I supposed to react?

"I think coming here to cheer her on should be testimony to the fact that you're not running away anymore, right?" I say.

She raises her head, takes a deep breath, looks me straight in the eyes, and says,

“I... I guess so. I told her not to run away from all this back in the day, but in the end, I’ve been the one who’s running. I’m just the worst.”

Maybe I should ask for more details, but I don’t think I should right now. She’s already told me enough, so I don’t think pushing her would be the right thing to do. The fact of the matter is, she feels overwhelmed by Hasaki. Maybe she’s just not sure about everything right now.

“I think it’s pretty cool to admit your mistakes and attempt to fix them, to be honest,” I say. I place one of my hands on her head and rustle her hair. This is when she’d usually shout something like, “You’re ruining the mood!” But this time, she doesn’t. Instead, she looks at me and shouts “What?!” Her face goes beet red, and our eyes lock.

Shit, maybe I went too far? Did I overstep my boundaries? I remove my hand before disaster ensues and try to change the topic quickly. “Anyway, maybe we should go back to the court to see how Hasaki’s doing.”

“Yeah. If we stay alone for much longer, you’re just gonna start trying to get into my pants again,” she replies, her face still red as a tomato.

Shit, I knew she didn’t like that. I have to avoid doing stuff like this as much as I can. I don’t want her to feel really awkward around me. We head back to the tennis court. We left Ike hanging at the stands; hopefully we didn’t make him worry about us too much.

Chapter 12: A Heated Match

We return to the stands where Ike is waiting.

“You two sure took your time. Did something happen?”

Touka doesn't answer his question. Instead, she shifts her attention fully to Hasaki, who's still playing her match. Looks like she's not in the mood to talk to anyone.

“Uh, we just ended up getting distracted,” I answer. Don't want there to be an awkward moment.

He goes silent for a moment, as if in thought, but then a smirk quickly forms on his face. “Oh, I get it now. Okay, sounds good.”

“Would you two shut up?” Touka suddenly whispers. It's pretty low, but Ike still manages to hear her. I can only imagine that after telling me her backstory and that bonding moment we just had, she's not totally in the mood to socialize with him right now. Ike whistles, letting me know that she's touchy right now. We should just do as she says.

I'm actually kinda curious to see how the match is going, since we ended up missing a large chunk of it. “So how is the match going?” I ask Ike.

“The current set score is five games to three right now. Kana's serving on this one—if she takes this game, she'll win,” he answers.

I notice she's lost a game while I was gone. Lemme check the game score right now... It's 30-0 in Hasaki's favor. The speed she manages to get when hitting the ball seems inhuman and impossible to counter, but her opponent does it almost effortlessly. Hasaki returns it without a sweat. The ball flies onto her opponent's side, and she lets it go. Nice. One more point, and the game should be in the bag, right?

“Double fault!”

Unfortunately for her, she messes up multiple serves after that. The set score is now five to four, and the game is 40-30 in Hasaki's favor. Victory is so close, yet so far. If her opponent nabs another point, they'll enter a deuce. And if that happens, then Hasaki'll have the upper hand in this game, since she's the one serving. Losing this game means that the set score would be five to five. If Hasaki slips up, she'll be in serious trouble—her opponent will be the server in the last game. But that's just objectively speaking.

The decisive match kicks off. Steeling herself, Kana dribbles the ball a couple of times with her racket and serves. She tends to start with a backhand. It's her first serve, but this one feels noticeably slower than usual. It's most likely intentional from her end—her opponent's already adapted to her regular speed, so this'll confuse her. She's transferring the strength from her waist directly into the ball; although it's slow, it has a lot of power behind it. This time, I'm certain the ball will be impossible to counter, but she somehow manages to do it. Her opponent strikes at it, and it heads toward the center of the court near the net. Hasaki immediately runs for the ball with everything she has, but it has already bounced once. Unfortunately, she's not fast enough to reach it before it touches the ground.

“Game set and match! The winner is Hasaki!” the referee suddenly announces.

Fortunately for Hasaki, the ball ended up bouncing on her opponent's side rather than hers. The other girl doesn't look very happy, but nevertheless remains calm. Meanwhile, Hasaki heads over to her seat to take a short break. She's completely expressionless.

It's so close right now that I'm not at all sure who'll win. I'm on the edge of my seat.



“You think Hasaki's hanging in there?” I ask.

“Uh, no clue, dude,” Ike answers, clearly anxious.

We went to talk to her after her last match, but she'd looked rather grim. "I'm sorry, guys, but I think I need some time to myself to rethink my strategy. I can't spend much time with you," she'd said and quickly left. We didn't even get a whole minute to talk with her.

"It's not like freaking out over her will help. Once she's playing in the court, she'll be on her own. All we can do is cheer her on and hope for the best," Touka says, seemingly calm. It's pretty obvious from that comment that she's also played tennis, seeing as she knows what it feels like to be on the court. If that's her suggestion, I guess all we really can do is cheer her on.

"Anyways, like it matters how she feels right now. There's no way she'll lose against her of all people," Touka says while looking down at the court. Looks like Hasaki's facing the ponytail girl Touka was talking to earlier. I agree—it seems like she's already admitted defeat, so this should be a cakewalk for Hasaki.

"She was already in the mood to lose, so there's no way Hasaki-senpai will be defeated, even if she's not in peak condition today," Touka continues, sounding very bored.

Yep, chances are this will be a guaranteed win for Hasaki. But the more she says it, the more I think that it's actually a bad omen. I can't help but think this could be the match Hasaki messes up.



"Game, set, and match! Won by Hasaki!"

Well, my doubts are quickly dispelled. She exerts a great amount of pressure with her gameplay, making the match extremely one-sided. Someone call the police, because I just witnessed a murder on that court. Meanwhile, the other girl is on the verge of tears.

"Kana seems to be having some performance swings today," Ike whispers. It sounds like he's still concerned about her.

"Looks like it, yeah," I follow.

We head toward the court's entrance to check on Hasaki. Now, she looks really tired.

"Congratulations on the win. You thoroughly dominated her," Ike says.

I guess he's not gonna bring up the elephant in the room? Her weird performance issues, I mean. I'll just follow his example and congratulate her. "If you win the next one, you get into the semis, right? That's pretty amazing," I say.

"Thanks, guys, but it's not really that amazing. People were expecting me to win this tournament from the start, so..." she trails off. Any other person would find her arrogant for saying that, but do I sense some self-deprecation mixed in? She continues with a thin smile, "...Sorry, that was in bad taste. I'm not in top condition yet, so I need to gather myself and get in the mood as quickly as possible."

Ike nods and replies, "Yeah. We don't want to interrupt you as you're trying to concentrate, so we'll just stay in the stands and cheer for you."

"Is that all we can do for her, though? Surely there's something we can do to help, isn't there?" I add.

"No, no—that's not it at all. Having all of your support helps me a lot. I'm sorry... I had you guys come all the way here to watch me compete, and all I do is ruin the mood," she says.

"Nah, you're just taking this really seriously. It's pretty cool to see you like this, Hasaki," I answer.

She looks down at the ground and continues, "I'll do my best in the next match so you carry on thinking that way about me." With that, she quickly returns to the court. I thought she was playing super well already, but I guess she considers herself rusty at the moment.

"I don't really know how to explain this, but it's like she's got something on her mind that's preventing her from playing properly," Touka suddenly adds as she watches Hasaki leave. This is the first time she's chimed in.

"I guess," Ike replies.

She's right—Hasaki seems to be on edge in every single match she's played so

far. In a way, it's cool, but I'd rather see her play when she's calm and collected.



Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like I'll get to see her in peak performance today.

"Game, set, and match! The winner is Arisumi!"

Hasaki doesn't even manage to win the next game. The score ends six to zero. She huffs with her hands on her legs, obviously exhausted. I can't see her face, but I'm sure she's not taking this loss very well. On the other hand, the girl she just faced—the one who had a lower ranking—looks overjoyed. She's being crowded by people shouting her name. In the end, Hasaki was defeated in the quarterfinals. She was viewed as the favorite who'd sweep the competition.

"Hahaha... I'm sorry. In the end, I totally messed it up," Hasaki says as she leaves the court. She's incredibly downhearted and doesn't seem to be in the mood to do anything. I feel her—that loss would deal a blow to anyone's morale. She's still wearing a smile, though, as if to reassure us while hiding her real feelings.

"This is the first time I've seen a real tennis match, but it was actually pretty interesting. Hopefully, you don't mind if I tag along to see you again," I say. She may have lost, but it was still great to see her playing like that. Hopefully she realizes that I was impressed by what I saw.

"Mhm. I'll make sure to play way better next time to make up for today," she replies. Looks like she didn't quite catch what I meant.

"What's your plan for the rest of the day, Kana?" Ike asks.

She casts her gaze to the ground and whispers, "I'm going to cool down and watch the rest of the matches. I know it's a little weird to ask this, but could you guys give me some alone time for the rest of the day?"

"Okay, then we'll head home. Be careful on your way home, too," Ike says.

Wait, we're actually leaving her alone? Seriously?

"Sounds good. Thanks for coming to cheer for me today, Tomoki-kun. And you too, Touka-chan," she replies.

"What about me?" Ike butts in.

"Oh, sorry about that! How could I forget about you, Haruma? Thanks!"

"You don't sound very grateful, forgetting about me and all!" he jokes with an exaggerated shrug, making her smile as usual. "Anyways, we'll be heading out."

"Mhm. Bye-bye!" Hasaki says as she waves at us.

The three of us head to the train station, but we don't speak much on the way. I bet everyone has their minds on Hasaki and her performance today. Every time I remember her desolate expression as she left the court, it ends up ruining my own mood.

"Hey, guys—is it really okay for us to leave her alone like that?" I ask Ike and Touka.

The two of them, who are walking in front of me, stop and turn around. Maybe I'm in the wrong here. I don't know what it feels like to lose like she just did, but I think that keeping her company would've been better for her. Let's see what they have to say.

"If she wants to be left alone, I think that's what we should do. It's not the first time she's asked for something like that," Ike explains.

"Yeah, I'd definitely like to be alone if I lost a game like the one she just did," Touka adds.

"I see. Then yeah, I guess leaving her alone was the best choice."

"I don't think it's exactly right, though. I wanted to stay back and keep her company—just the two of us, but we need to respect her wishes first and foremost" Ike says. Touka nods in agreement. Both of them have experience playing sports before, so if that's their opinion, then I'll respect it.

"Okay. Sorry for asking something so weird. Anyway, we should split here. I need to go find a restroom somewhere. I'll go straight home after that," I say.

Ike and Touka seem surprised. They look at each other with surprise and then smile. They probably guessed my true intentions to backtrack and go see Hasaki. I gotta try it, at least, even if they said it's not the best idea.

“Okay. See you later, then,” Ike says.

“I'll text you later, so you better answer back. Got it, Senpai?” Touka demands.

I nod and turn around. I know I'm probably sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. I know that I should just head home now. I know that, but she's my friend. There must be something I can do to console her. Maybe I can't say anything to make her feel better, but I know that when someone's going through something difficult, the best thing to do is just stay by their side.

I rush back to the sports park, hoping to see her there once more.

Interlude: A Conversation Between Siblings

Touka and Haruma start chatting on their way home.

“You think it’s okay to return home with me instead of going with him?” he asks as they wait for their train on the station’s platform. The beautiful siblings are attracting everyone’s attention. The guys mistake Touka for Haruma’s girlfriend and glare at him with intense jealousy.

“Nah, I don’t think I should,” she answers, her tone completely neutral.

“Yeah. Me too, actually. I’m sure he’s just going back to the tennis court to see Kana instead of to the toilet. Aren’t you peeved at the fact that he’s going back for her just like that?”

“Of course I am. I know he just sees her as a friend, but I still don’t like it at all,” she answers immediately, her expression beginning to sour. “But it’s not like I can do anything about it, y’know? I’ve always admired how he cares so much about others, though. I love that about him, so I can’t stop him... I just can’t bring myself to do it,” she whispers, resigned.

Ike smiles at her reply.

“Huh? What are you laughing about, you weirdo?” she asks in an annoyed voice.

With that same wide smile, he says, “I’m just happy that he’s the one who ended up being your significant other.”

Touka’s face reddens. Though she’s still considerably angry at Ike, she assents, “Yeah, I really couldn’t have asked for a better boyfriend...”



Chapter 13: A Façade

I finally arrive at the sports park and manage to spot Hasaki right away. She stands out because she's sitting alone by the edge of one of the courts and watching the semi-finals. Well, that and the fact that she looks gloomy as hell. I'll try to be as sweet as possible, just in case.

"Hey," I softly greet her. She doesn't reply; instead, she looks my way, and her eyes widen in surprise. She didn't even notice me approaching. I guess she had other things on her mind.

"Hey...!" she shouts in response, clearly taken aback. Well, at least she doesn't seem angry or disgusted by me. That's a good first step.

"You okay if I sit next to you?" I ask. She nods silently while gazing at the court. I sit beside her. As I do, she suddenly begins talking to me, although she's not looking my way, "I'm sorry that you came all the way here to cheer me on today. I behaved horribly the whole time." Her voice is weak.

"Don't sweat it. Everyone has bad days. I should be the one who's apologizing."

She finally turns to look at me now and shakes her head. "Why would you need to apologize?" she asks.

"I know you said you wanted to be alone, but in the end, I decided to betray that. So yeah."

She smiles, but she seems to be on the brink of tears right now. I wish I knew how she was really feeling. "So you were worried about me?" she asks.

"Yeah. I mean, you're my friend. Obviously I'd be worried."

“My friend...” she whispers in such a low voice that I can only just make it out. “...I know this’ll sound like a lame excuse, but there’s a reason for my mood and bad performance today,” she continues in a more-audible tone.

“Oh yeah? A reason?” I prod.

“Mhm,” she nods and then adds, “I lost my chance to be with the one I loved.”

“You did?”

“Mhm, I sure did. He came all this way to cheer for me today. I made a little promise to myself—if I could fully concentrate on my games today, even with him here watching me, then it’d mean that I’d be ready to let him go. Several times, I’ve told myself that tennis should be the only thing on my mind, that I don’t need him at all, but...” she pauses to take a deep breath, closes her eyes, and continues, “I thought that by becoming friends with him, we’d be able to go back to the way we were years ago. I’d be happy with just staying friends, even. But in the end, I was proven wrong.” She gives me a feeble, thin smile.

“No matter how hard I try to forget him or push him out of my mind, I just can’t do it. I can’t even concentrate on my games anymore. I spend every waking moment just thinking about him,” she says. She places her hands over her chest and squeezes them with a pained expression. “And today’s performance was a result of that. I couldn’t concentrate and lost when I shouldn’t have, even though he came all this way to support me. And that made my mood even worse. That’s why I played and acted like crap today. I’ve got nothing going for me.”

I feel very conflicted right now. She’s talking about Ike, for sure—I mean, everyone knows she has a huge thing for him. After what she just told me, I’m almost 100% sure it has to be him. Who else could it be? I’m legitimately surprised he rejected her, though. That didn’t seem to be the case today. When did that happen?

“So you confessed your feelings to him?” I ask

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then what did you mean by losing your chance to be with him?”

She looks at me somewhat annoyed, for whatever reason, but then answers, “He has a girlfriend already. That’s why.”

He doesn't have a girlfriend, as far as I know. If he does, I'm definitely late to the party; but I like to think I'd notice if he did. Actually, let me think this through—maybe she thinks Ike's got himself a girlfriend? Against all odds, Ike might actually be in a relationship and just hasn't told me yet, but I doubt that's the case. What should I tell her right now? I'm at a loss here, but I'll try my best.

"I don't think that's a reason for you to completely lose hope, though," I tell her.

She raises her head the moment I say that. "Huh?" she blurts out, both confused and surprised.

"I mean, I wouldn't say now would be the right time to confess, but I also don't think you should give up on him just yet."

"Even if I know what the answer would be beforehand? Even if it would ultimately be an inconvenience for him?" she asks. She's clearly against my advice.

I shake my head and try to explain my reasoning. Being honest is the key here. She should look him straight in the eyes and express her feelings frankly. That way, Ike can reply honestly in turn. What happens after that is pretty much final. I mean, she's his childhood friend—she should know by now that being straightforward with him is the best approach. Well, not like I have experience to back up my knowledge. I've obviously never dated, but I at least know that much.

"People change over time, both in terms of appearance and feelings. I mean, look at me—I'm supposed to be the school criminal. Someone who supposedly has no friends. But now I've got Ike, you, and others, too."

Ike and Makiri-sensei really contributed to that. Thanks to the student council, I've managed to gain some new friends, like Asakura.

"Things happen, and situations constantly change. But it can be the opposite, as well—things can grow stagnant. Like, if nothing's done about the current situation, then nothing'll progress. If you want to change how he feels about you, act on it. Sitting on your hands definitely won't change the status quo."

"So if I did something, maybe he would see me in a different light? Like,

romantically?” she asks.

I nod. Even if he does have a partner right now, if she tells him how she truly feels, maybe it'll change his whole perspective—both his current girlfriend and Hasaki.

“I don't really want to become a homewrecker, though. I mean, what if he changes his mind about his girlfriend?” she asks in a worried voice.

“I mean... if you expressed your feelings, and you managed to change his mind, wouldn't that be fair? In the end, it's down to him, not you. If he did change his mind, his current relationship would be toast, either way. So yeah, I wouldn't worry too much about it. Like I said, giving up won't solve anything. You should at least try to confess. Don't you think so?”

Again, I'm not some experienced love guru. Maybe I just told her to do something incredibly shitty, but I don't want her to continue suffering in silence. I need to help her somehow, right?

“You're actually pretty smart when it comes to these things, Tomoki-kun. But I'm not so sure being super pushy about my feelings is the best way to approach it,” she says. Crap, she's probably weirded out by my advice. I totally screwed up.

“M-Maybe, yeah...” I mumble. I just agree to placate her, but she notices that I'm bummed out and smiles to console me.

“Hey, Tomoki-kun. Do you think everything would turn out well if I confessed to him?” she asks.

“Beats me,” I say bluntly. I really don't know, to be honest. They're always smiling and having a good time together, but I don't know the full extent of the situation.

“You're not gonna dip your toes in just in case it goes wrong?” she asks.

“I guess. If everything falls to pieces, you can roast me as much as you want. I'll take full responsibility for it.”

If she ends up getting rejected, the most important thing is to look forward and move on. On that end, I'll try to ease her pain as much as possible. Letting go of someone you love isn't easy; that's why she'll need all the help she can get.

“Don’t say that. Taking responsibility for something like that isn’t as easy as you’re making it out to be,” she says.

Well, she’s got a point. Let’s say she’s been rejected, and I’m trying to help her—no matter what I do, no matter how much she complains, the bottom line is that she’s the one who has to move beyond it. No way I can possibly help with that. I should’ve chosen my words better, and I tell her as much.

She takes a deep breath. Her shoulders droop, but she forces a smile and starts speaking again. “I guess I’ve realized it for a while now, but... you’re not getting what I’ve been saying, right?” This time, her tone is cold and distant.

“Hm?” I blurt.

“Like, the real point has been totally flying over your head.”

“W-What?”

“I was trying to tell you something, you know.” she says.

“You were?” I ask. What the hell’s she talking about?

“Oh my god! Whatever. I guess worrying so much about it was just worthless on my end!” she suddenly shouts. She locks her eyes on mine, totally resolute, and declares, “Okay, I won’t give up! It doesn’t matter if he already has a girlfriend! I’ll do whatever it takes to get him to love me! Soon, he’ll realize I’m the only one for him! It’s too late to go back on your word now, Tomoki-kun! You can’t tell me that it’s wrong to butt in anymore! And you can’t tell me that it’s awkward to keep confessing my feelings, no matter how many times I get rejected!”

Damn, what the hell happened inside of her to bring this out? I feel sorta intimidated right now. I have no clue if my advice helped or not, but it feels like I mostly just riled her up and got her fuming. Why is it so hard to relate and communicate with other people?

“Y-Yeah, no problem...” I manage to stutter.

“Don’t look so down! I’ve found my answer, after all!” she informs me with a smile. Well, at least the bit about riling her up seemed to help—her attitude’s done a total 180 compared to how she was mere moments ago. She still looks

like she's about to cry, though. I guess she's just getting overstimulated from all the emotions?

“Good to know,” I say.

She nods and exclaims, “Mhm, thanks! Thanks to you, now I feel a whole lot better, Yuu-kun!”

“Huh?”

Wait a second. I didn't hear that wrong, did I? Only one person has ever used that name for me. It was a nickname he gave to me all those years ago—the boy with beautiful, hazelnut-coloured hair. The boy who was a crybaby, but so pretty that he could easily be mistaken for a girl.

“...Natsuo?”

It can't be, can it? Is it truly him? For some reason, I just blurted out his name, but...



Interlude: Reunion

My knight in shining armor was always there for me whenever I was in peril. He's the only one I've ever loved—both then and now. In my youth, all I ever did was attract trouble. Then he suddenly appeared before me. After spending some time around him, I eventually realized I had fallen head over heels for him. And now, my life is a cycle of pain. That's my punishment for deceiving him up until now, and the more I think about it, the more it hurts.



I met him during our summer break when I was in 2nd grade. I used to go stay at my relative's house in the countryside. I remember loathing the idea of going there. Summertime meant isolation—I was pretty much attached at the hip with Haruma and Touka-chan, and going there meant I had to leave them. Plus, there wasn't a single kid my age at my relative's place; it was all adults.

One day, I was so bored that I left the house and happened to find a park nearby. Surprisingly enough, there were kids around my age who were playing together. I wanted to join in as well, but when I asked if I could...

"Who're you?" one of them asked while looking at me as if I were some sort of alien.

I wanted to say that I wasn't from around here and I was only staying for the summer, but they burst into laughter the moment I opened my mouth. I was dumbstruck—what had I done for them to laugh at me so abruptly? They were all pointing at me and cackling.

"You look and act like a giiirl! You sure you're a boy?"

"Or maybe... he's gay! Hahaha! He's totally gay!"

You can already imagine how I felt. Needless to say, all I wanted to do was run away and cry. As a kid, I looked a bit more boyish than I would've liked. I'd always preferred the outdoors compared to playing inside, so I wore boy's clothes instead of dresses that could tear and get dirty. My hair was short, too. It was that and a few other things that made kids assume I was a boy. It got to the point where people in my class stopped calling me Kana and just started calling me Natsuo.

Back to those unpleasant boys, though—although normally, I wouldn't have let it get to me, the idea that I'd spend another summer alone and their dreadful treatment toward me made me want to burst into tears. I remember thinking to myself, "I just want to go home already." I'd turned around, prepared to return home with tears pouring down my cheeks, when someone spoke up.

"You guys are seriously all picking on someone so weak? That's pretty lame."

Another tough-looking kid appeared out of nowhere. He had the look of a troublemaker constantly itching for a fight.

"What'd you say?!"

"And who the frick're you?!"

"You sure got balls!"

The group of kids immediately ganged up on him. I remember the biggest one shouting, "I'll fuck you up!" as he rushed toward the new boy, his arms prepared to swing. Fortunately, the mysterious boy easily managed to evade his attack. The bigger boy stumbled, and he took advantage of that and kicked him swiftly in his stomach.

"Ugh!" the aggressor shouted as he fell to the ground.

"What's wrong? You can all come at me at the same time. I don't care," the mysterious boy declared.

The other boys took a look at their downed "leader" and started to back off.

"Hmph! Let's just go. The freaks can play together on their own!"

"We'll never play with you two, got it?!" they cried as they retreated with their tails between their legs.

“Tch. Dumbasses,” the mysterious boy muttered once he made sure they were gone. He looked at me and smiled. I remember being taken aback by the gesture—he had such a lovely, calming smile that I hadn’t expected it in the slightest. He spoke to me with a sweet, reassuring voice, “Hey, you saw what they did when you tried to talk to them. Don’t worry; I bet they’re just jealous ’cause you’re cute.”

He treated me like a boy, as well. But, as weird as it might sound, for once, I didn’t mind it at all.

He continued in a gloomy voice, “You don’t look like you’re from around here. I’m always here for summer break, too, so I don’t really know anyone.” The sadness in his voice stood out to me. I wanted to ask if he was okay, but he started speaking again. “Um, anyway, what I mean is... if you don’t have any friends either, uh...” He was starting to fumble, and his cheeks were deep red. I knew exactly what he was trying to express.

“Yeah! Let’s hang out together!” I answered with a smile before he could finish his sentence.

He nodded wordlessly and smiled. He had just fought with a kid a few moments ago, no sweat, but now, he was having trouble asking me to be his friend. I found it pretty amusing, to be honest.

“I’m Yuuji. What’s your name?” he said, catching me totally off-guard. He thought I was a boy, but I was too scared to tell him the truth. If he knew I was a girl, he wouldn’t want to play with me anymore.

And that’s why I ended up answering using my classroom nickname, “...Natsuo.”

“Okay, Natsuo,” he said with a smile. He extended his hand toward me for a handshake. I reciprocated with a smile on my face—I had finally gotten a friend!

That was our first meeting, and the first instance of me lying to him.



After he came into my life, my summers changed. Instead of loathing my vacations, they were the times I looked forward to the most. I spent all my time with him that year, then the next year, and the year after that, as well. I barely went anywhere with my parents and relatives anymore. I was never able to make friends with the other kids, but I didn't mind. I got along with Yuu-kun, and that was more than enough for me. That was back when I had started playing tennis, too. I remember that we played together sometimes, but he always won. His reflexes, speed, and strength were just so far beyond mine.

"Dude, c'mon! I've never even played this before. How am I winning against you so much? Aren't you supposed to be in the tennis club at your school? Maybe you should stop wasting your time on all those girls and practice more!"

He always teased me like that, but it didn't bother me. I loved the way he played—it was so explosive, so amazing! I mean, I just thought he was a fantastic guy in general. And even though I only got to hang out with him for two weeks out of the year, I treasured our short time together just as much as the time I spent with Touka-chan and Haruma.

As for when I started developing feelings for him, that happened during the summer of fifth grade.



I remember it as clear as day: I was waiting at our usual spot in the park for Yuu-kun. Yuu-kun was particularly late, for whatever reason, so I was left alone for a bit. While I was sitting around, a group of boys suddenly approached me.

"We know you two losers are always together, but there's no way you're actually friends," one of them cackled with the most heinous grin smeared on his face. I remembered him—it was that big kid that ate shit when Yuu-kun kicked him. That was years ago, though, and he'd grown up considerably since that day.

The other boys chimed in, "You only hang out with him 'cause otherwise, you'd have no friends, but we know you don't like him."

“It’s tragic, really.”

I ignored them. I mean, what was the point of indulging them with their petty game? I’d only lose my cool for no reason. These guys were nothing to me.

“What’s wrong with you, huh? Don’t frickin’ ignore us!” one of them spat while glaring at me.

In return, I continued to shun him. His shout had startled me, but I tried not to let it show. I didn’t even return his look.

“Hah. You’re cocky, but don’t worry. We’re here to help you,” the big boy said with an evil grin. “We’ll beat the shit out of that creepy dude you play with and make sure he never comes near you again. Then you can play with us from now on!”

Now that was something I couldn’t dismiss. It both frightened and surprised me, but I was so shocked that I couldn’t say anything back.

“He threatened you into being his pal, right? It’s obvious from his face—he’s always looking for a fight,” he continued. “I haven’t forgotten last time. I was scared ’cause he was strong, but he doesn’t scare me anymore! You should join us. We can beat him together, and we’ll be there to protect you afterward. If you help us defeat him, then we’ll let you play with us.”

Yuu-kun wasn’t nearly as big or strong as he is now back then; he still was pretty average in terms of size. In terms of size, he was no match for that kid. That boy towered over everyone else his age, and he was thirsting for revenge.

“I lost back then, but I’ll win now. We don’t want frickin’ loners like him in this park! You agree, right?” he said as he placed his hand on one of my shoulders.

I was enraged by that point—he’d said such horrible things about Yuu-kun, and he didn’t even know him! I brushed his hand off, pushed him aside, and shouted, “Don’t you dare badmouth him!”

He lost his balance and toppled over. At first, he seemed genuinely confused by my reaction—he legitimately thought that Yuu-kun had forced me into playing with him. But his confusion soon gave way to anger once he’d realized what I’d done, and his face went red with fury.

“You frickin’...!” he yelled. He yanked me by my hair and threw me down.

“Eek!” I screamed. It hurt so much that I ended up screaming in my normal feminine voice.

“Hahaha! Didya hear that scream?!”

“I told you he’s gay!”

“Ew, that’s gross as hell!”

“I-I’m not gay!”

“Yeah right! You’re definitely gay!”

“No way. If anything, I bet he doesn’t have a dick!”

“Let’s make sure of that, then!”

“Okay, Atsushi—you and I’ll grab his hands, and Kaito’ll pants him.”

“Naaah. Why do I have to be the one to see his dick? Why don’t you do it, Futti?”

The big kid, whom they referred to as Futti, didn’t seem like he was in a mood to take orders from others anymore. He raised his fist menacingly and shouted, “Just do as I say!”

“Ugh! Fine, okay man!”

They pinned my arms behind my back while Kaito hesitated in front of me—clearly, he was not enthused about the task he was given. Thinking about what they were going to do to me made me horribly afraid, more than I’d ever been before. All I could do was cry.

“Sob! Stop! Don’t do it!” I pleaded through tears.

The boys laughed it off, as if watching me cry was some raunchy late-night talk show. They all took turns mocking me.

“Look at the little homo; he’s cryin’!”

“Aw, is someone a widdle cwybaby? Damn, what a pussy,” Kaito sneered as his hands approached my pants.

“Yuu-kun—please help me!” I suddenly cried out in fear. I no longer cared

about anything, so I found myself shouting the first thing that came to mind. I never thought he would actually come, but suddenly, I could hear his voice.

“The hell are you doing to my friend?!”

He appeared out of nowhere, as though summoned by my cry for help. He rushed over and smashed his foot into Kaito from behind.

“Augh!” the boy cried as he crumpled to the ground.

The other two stood dumbfounded for a few seconds, but they quickly realized what was going on. They pushed me aside, sending me flying into the ground. It hurt, but I was virtually numb by that point. All of my attention was focused on my savior, Yuu-kun. He was angrier than I’d ever seen him before; I’d even say he was enraged.

“Are you okay, Kaito?” Atsushi shouted as he rushed toward Kaito.

“And here comes the other loner! You’re gonna need plastic surgery after I’m done with you!” Futti yelled out as he lunged toward Yuu-kun.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed as he quickly evaded the bigger kid’s fist. He promptly retaliated and shouted, “You’re a bunch of lame-ass clowns!”

“Gah! Owwww!” Futti screamed as Yuu-kun’s fist crashed into his face. Like Kaito, he was down on the floor in a heap.

Atsushi, who was carrying Kaito on one shoulder, also knelt down to help Futti back to his feet. The bigger boy was sobbing. The three of them quickly ran away while screaming, “We’ll remember this!” Everything had happened so quickly that I couldn’t really react.

“Natsuo, dude, crying doesn’t suit you. You don’t want to mess up that nice-looking face, right?” he gently joked as he extended a hand to help me stand up.

I managed to get up and tried to say something in return, but it took me a while to gather myself. Finally, I stammered, “I-I’m not crying...” while I wiped the tears from my eyes.

He politely ignored the fact that I had obviously been crying and tried to change the topic instead. “Pretty weird of you to get into trouble, ’specially with those three.”

“They were talking crap about you, so I lashed out at them.”

“Oh, they were? Damn. Well, thanks. You’re kind of a crybaby, though, so try not to pick too many fights, ‘kay?”

“But how do you expect me not to when they’re making fun of my friend?”

“If I see them again, I’ll be sure to punch their lights out so they learn to stay the hell away from you. They’ll never bully you again,” he said as he looked over in the direction the kids had retreated.

All that was on my mind was how cool and dependable he was, you know? I wish I could’ve thanked him for what he did, but I never ended up doing so.

“Whoa! Be careful, Natsuo!” he suddenly shouted. He quickly ran over and grabbed me. The moment he did, my mind went blank. I can still recall the warmth of his embrace. I heard a sharp sound, followed by one of the kids shouting, “Shit! Run away!” Had they come back? What was that other noise? I opened my eyes and looked down. There was something crimson dripping from above and pattering on the ground.

“Huh?” I blurted as I raised my head. That’s when I saw Yuu-kun’s face splattered in blood. There was a gash near his eye that was bleeding heavily. It looked incredibly painful, and I was immediately worried about if his eye was okay. I also noticed a bloody rock nearby. Suddenly, everything seemed to add up—Atsushi had thrown a rock at us, and Yuu-kun had protected me. Once I realized, I started shouting, “Yuu-kun, are you okay?! You need to go to a hospital!”

“Ugh. Ouch, I guess. Yeah, I should probably get this checked. But don’t worry, it’s fine. It really doesn’t hurt that much.”

My ass it didn’t! I knew from the first glance that it must’ve hurt like hell! He only told me that to reassure me, since I was on the brink of tears again. Even though it must’ve been painful, he acted calm just so I wouldn’t freak out. I felt horrible; he was constantly saving me from trouble, and I was left here powerless.

In the end, he did go to the hospital. I made sure to stay by him... It was really all I could do.



After that, we rarely saw each other. I was so scared of meeting him again—I mean, how could he consider me a friend after what happened?

“I’m sorry, Natsuo, but it looks like I won’t be able to go out ’til they remove these stitches. Grandpa’s orders,” Yuu-kun told me when I first went to visit him. It was a relief to see him doing well. Although he didn’t hate me for what happened, I was still consumed by guilt every time I saw the injury under his eye.

“No worries; this thing is actually cool! I got it by protecting a friend! Don’t worry, Natsuo!”

“But...” I hesitated.

“Aw man, don’t look at me like that. I didn’t want you to get hurt. I mean, you’re gonna want a girlfriend in the future, right?” he followed with a smile on his face.

Pain filled my chest the moment he smiled. This time, however, it wasn’t from guilt—it was a whole new emotion that I couldn’t understand back then. “What was it that I felt?” I’d often wondered. I was too young to grasp what it truly meant back then.

“What’s wrong?” he asked me, noticing my grim expression.

My chest felt even tighter than before. Why did I feel that way? Since I couldn’t comprehend it, I smiled instead. “Nothing, I’m fine. Besides, it’s not like I’ll ever have a girlfriend, anyways,” I told him.

That’s when I should’ve told him that I was really a girl, but I never finished my sentence.



We continued to hang out that summer—fortunately without any more trouble. Every moment I spent with him was filled with happiness, but that

strange tight feeling persisted in me. It seriously worried me, despite the great times I was having. I finally realized its source on the day we parted ways. It was the end of summer, and our final meetup went much like the years prior. We were staring out at the sunset as we finally realized what day it was.

“Today was awesome, just like always! Thanks for sticking around, Natsuo! It’s gonna be a while ’til we see each other again, but I know we’ll meet up at the park again next year!” he said with a smile.

Yep. Starting tomorrow, I’d have to wait a whole year to see him again, and I was devastated. Normally, it would be fine because I had Haruma and Touka-chan back home, but this time was different. When that idea finally registered in my head, the pain in my chest got even worse.

I noticed his scar, the proof that he’d protected me from danger. I still felt guilty when I saw it, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but think it really suited him. And it also made me feel so, so happy. We hugged each other to say goodbye, and my mind became a hot mess as we did. It had finally dawned on me that what I felt for him was different than what I felt for Haruma or Touka-chan. I’d finally realized I—

“What’s wrong?” Yuu-kun asked me, looking worried.

I raised my head, and our eyes locked. Now that I’d finally realized my feelings, I couldn’t behave in the same way as I’d always done.

“I-It’s nothing, okay?! Anyways, see you next year!” I blurted out. I knew my face had to be red as a tomato, so I quickly turned around so he wouldn’t see it. After that hug, I just couldn’t bring myself to look at him. I know that left him confused for a moment, but he didn’t seem to give it much thought. He waved his hand goodbye and cheerily replied, “Okay, see ya next year!”

That’s how we promised to meet again next year. As the sun set, summer vacation, and subsequently our time together, was over. In the end, I couldn’t fulfill my promise; I couldn’t bring myself to meet him again.



Over the next year, my body underwent some major changes. For example, I got a lot taller. That would've been fine on its own, but my chest had also grown with it. I was pretty flat up until the end of 5th grade, but after that, I needed to start wearing a bra. I also started to look more feminine, in general. I would no longer be able to fool him by pretending to be Natsuo. That was the main reason I was reluctant to see him again. Back then, I was of the mindset that he'd reject me if he knew I was a girl. Although I tried to reassure myself that wouldn't be the case, the negative thoughts took over and won out. After all, I'd deceived him for years. I was afraid of his reaction, afraid of the consequences.

I wanted to meet him again, since he was my first love. But simultaneously, I was scared that he would reject who I was, and, as a result, reject my feelings. I harbored those feelings deep down for a long time. I thought long and hard about what to do with them. I carried them with me to the summer house next year. Finally, on the day before I was supposed to return home, I decided I'd go meet him. I wore something cute and girly, and I took my time fixing my hair, which was longer now than it had been before. Finally, I resolved myself to tell him the truth.

I mustered all my courage and headed to the park where we usually met. On my way, I hesitated countless times. I fought against myself to turn back, but I eventually ended up at the park. There he was, sitting and waiting at the usual spot. He looked dejected, which made me feel both terrible and happy that he'd missed me. Just looking at him made my heart race, and it felt like I had butterflies in my stomach. I knew that I loved him.

Yuu-kun, sitting off in the distance, sighed unhappily. It seemed he had realized Natsuo wasn't coming, and he got up to leave with a sour look on his face. All I could do was watch him as he began to walk away. I couldn't call out to him. I had to do something—anything—before he left, but I was paralyzed. When he passed by me, all I could do was just stand there uselessly. I knew that if I shouted out to him, he would turn around. I had to be brave! But what if he hated me for what I did, for lying about my real identity? All these thoughts whirled around in my mind as he finally left the park. In the end, I wasn't brave enough, and I broke my promise to him. We never met at the park again.



The seasons passed, and I entered middle school. That year, I decided that I would definitely meet him. I'd spent every living minute in regret after that summer day. All I could think about were the summer days we'd lost out on. At that point, I wasn't even fearful of the possibility of him rejecting me. I just wanted to see him again, and that overpowered any sense of fear I may have had.

The first day of my vacation, I decided I would make sure that he would see me as a girl. I wore a skirt, did my hair, and even wore a little lipgloss. There's no way he wouldn't be attracted to me like that, I thought to myself. But, more importantly, he'd see me as Kana, not the Natsuo he had once known. As I thought this, I headed towards the park... but he wasn't there anymore. In fact, I never saw him again after my final year of elementary school, even though I'd returned to the park for two more years after that.



When I saw Yuu-kun during our first year of high school, I recognized him immediately. I thought that fate had reunited us. Our classmates had spread rumors about him being a dangerous individual, and that's when I also got to know his full name—Tomoki Yuuji. He looked menacing at first, but I knew how gentle he was deep inside. He was silent, and his dark demeanor made him seem older and more mature than he really was. But what mattered most was that he still had that scar under his eye. Seeing it made my heart race. I knew it scared other people and added fuel to the fire for gossip, but I never understood why. Honestly, I've always thought it looks super good on him! He's always been so cool.

I tried to talk to him a number of times, but I got too nervous every time I tried. My attempts always ended in failure. He just was so handsome now!

Why'd he have to become so good-looking in the first place?! Fate really is a cruel mistress. It only made things even more difficult for me, you know?! All I've wanted to do is to talk to him again, to spend time with him again like we used to... But why'd he have to get so damn handsome?! God. Screw you, Fate!

As long as I could see him every day, that was enough—at least, that's what I'd thought at first.



Could I just leave things like that, though? After all I'd suffered, I still couldn't bring myself to tell him the truth. As I kept telling myself—as long as he attended the same school, then I'd be fine. I just had to talk to him once; that's all—just one time to tell him everything, and we could go back to those days again. I kept dreaming of that as I watched him from a distance, unable to actually talk to him.

And so yet another year passed. Our second year had already begun, but then... Yuu-kun had gotten himself a girlfriend.

Interlude: Running Away

I know Yuu-kun's new girlfriend all too well—it's Touka-chan, Haruma's little sister. She's a cheerful, gentle, beautiful, outgoing, fashionable girl. She's the epitome of what every girl aspires to be, as well as total girlfriend material. No wonder Yuu-kun wanted to be her boyfriend.

Seeing them get along so well hurts a lot inside. I feel the same tightness in my chest, and I obsess over it daily. I feel horrible just by thinking about it. My mind's always a hot mess, so much so that it makes me want to burst into tears. Why wasn't I the one who asked him out first? I deserve to be with him more than Touka-chan, because I fell in love with him first! I love him more than she does! So why does she get to be with him?

It's obvious why I'm not, though—I never tried anything, never approached him. You reap what you sow. I know it's the result of my own mistakes. Seeing them together and realizing they actually make a good couple makes me lose all hope. There's no way I could ever swoop in and turn his attention to me instead. I know it's too late to do anything. But even still, I can't bring myself to give up on him!

“Wait, does that mean-! D-Does that mean that as long as she's cute, anyone's good enough?! Like, it could've been anyone other than Touka, right?! We'll see if your relationship is the real deal or not!”

I'd asked Haruma to help me see if their relationship was genuine or not, but everything ended up turning against me; in the end, I only ended up confirming that they actually liked each other a lot. That made me even more bitter than before. I had no other choice but to admit that I would never have another chance to have Yuu-kun for myself.

“I... I can't accept my feelings about their relationship. I just can't!” I told myself back in the day. By that point, I should've realized that I'd already thrown in the towel. Could I at least try to become his friend so we could return to the good old days? I figured that would be the best course of action, and that's how I

managed to gather the courage to “declare my feelings” to him.

“I’m so sorry, but could we start as friends and see how things go from there?!”

I put all of my heart into what I said. Even though I know my methods weren’t the greatest, I’d finally expressed what I had kept deep down to him. The fact that Touka came up in our conversation was very convenient, so I went along with it. I told him that the reason I wanted to be friends was so I could repair my relationship with Touka-chan. It was all an excuse, obviously. How could he refuse? She was his girlfriend, after all, and he wanted the best for her. Well, it wasn’t just an excuse—I really did want to mend bridges with her. Maybe that way, I could come up to terms with their relationship and even eventually support them.

In any case, that’s how Tomoki Yuuji and Hasaki Kana—AKA me—regained our friendship. I was so happy that I could finally stand next to him as a friend and just talk, you know? But it turned out that every time I got that chance, Touka would somehow pop up as the subject. Yuu-kun would always make it clear how much he cared about her, and every time he did, it totally ruined my mood. I thought I could’ve handled it, but things didn’t exactly go my way. Maybe one day, my feelings would finally die down, and I could just be his friend. That’s what I kept telling myself, anyway, but that was naive of me.

However, Natsuo was still clearly on his mind.

When we were walking to class together, the topic of his old friend was brought up. It was obvious he was referring to me—to Natsuo. When I asked him what he would say, he replied, “Hey, it’s been a long time since we saw each other. Wanna exchange phone numbers?” He still thought of me as a friend, even after I broke my promise and lied to him so many times. Hearing him talk about “his friend” the way he did granted me even more motivation to let my romantic feelings die and to try to be a better pal.

“My first friend was a boy named Natsuo.”

The topic came up at our first study meet, when Touka-chan and Haruma were both there. They both knew my old nickname, and they both noticed my reaction, as well. The moment Yuu-kun described Natsuo and how “special” he was, I knew they would put two and two together and realize who he was talking

about. I remember the way they looked at me, and it hurt like hell. So I did what I do best—I ran away.



“You’re the Natsuo that Yuuji-senpai was talking about, aren’t you?”

A few days after that, Touka-chan suddenly appeared at my doorstep—for the first time in years, might I add—and asked me that.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I stuttered.

“Don’t play dumb, please,” Touka said in a serious voice. She was looking me dead in the eyes as she spoke, “I have a bunch of questions I’d like to ask—like, why’d you pretend to be Natsuo in the first place? How come you never met him again? Why didn’t you just tell him the truth? But to be completely honest, I don’t give a damn about all that.”

“What...?”

Her words and her firm stare hurt too much, and it caused me to choke up. I didn’t want her to look at me like that. I tried to avert my gaze, but she grabbed my face with her hands and made me look her square in the eyes.

“My questions don’t matter; I don’t care. But YOU definitely have to do something. You’ve gotta tell him,” she said. Her voice trembled in anger, but there was something else hidden beneath. “That scar he has under the eye—he got that from protecting you, right?”

I couldn’t bring myself to answer that. Touka noticed my silence and continued, “I don’t know how you feel about his scar, but I’ll tell you what I think about it—I know for a fact that people would be way less scared of him without it! BUT!” She paused for emphasis, her expression darkened, and she said, “I know he’s still proud of that scar. He told me—his words, not mine—I got it from protecting a friend.”

My heart broke at that moment. I was overjoyed to know that he still thought of me and the scar in that way. Most of all, though, I was extremely embarrassed.

My uselessness and inability to do anything came rushing back to me, and I was reminded that she'd made a move on him before I ever did. I'm horrible... She went out of her way to console him; meanwhile, look at me.

She finally removed the grip on my face and said, "I dunno how you feel about him, but I know that he really wants to meet Natsuo again." Suddenly, she bowed her head and pleaded, "Please, please tell him the truth." I didn't reply, so she continued, "I'm not sure if he'll forgive you for lying to him, but I definitely think he should meet 'Natsuo' at least one more time and talk with him. So please..."

Touka-chan has changed a good deal since we last talked. Before, she never really expressed her opinions on anything. In a way, that was part of her appeal. To see her act like that, to the point of coming to my house and bowing in front of me for the boy she likes was incredible. She changed because of Yuu-kun, no doubt about it. My chest hurt again once I realized that fact. But as I looked at her, I thought, "How can I ever compete with her?" There was just no way.

"...Okay, got it," I mumbled.

Her harsh expression instantly vanished, and a smile formed in its place.

"But in return, I have a favor to ask. I want you two to come cheer me on at my next tennis competition," I said. That would be a great way for me to finally destroy these feelings once and for all. I wasn't expecting Touka-chan to understand my motives behind my favor.

"...Okay. Unlike you, I won't run away from my inferiority complex. But on one condition: you have to be the one who invites him," she said. She'd mentioned the elephant in the room—the main reason we grew apart. She was willing to face her weakness and made sure to let me know it. That's when I finally realized her struggle: being beside Haruma all these years must've created such a huge amount of pressure for her to excel to her brother's standards. She tried so hard to be the best at something that when I won against her all those years ago, she'd had a meltdown. After realizing, I was so devastated that I was unable to reply. I just feebly nodded and didn't reply. That was the best way to handle it.

That was the moment I promised myself that I'd finally move on, that I'd

finally forget about my “first love” for good.



You likely already know how that turned out. I couldn't concentrate at all during my matches, mainly because Touka-chan and Yuu-kun were constantly on my mind. That threw me off my game completely, and I made more mistakes than I usually would. I lost what should've been an easy match. It was pretty pathetic. Yep, in the end, I couldn't stop thinking about him or get over him. I'm a total failure, both at love and at tennis. I can't compromise, and I can't give up when the outcome's obvious. I can't do anything. I was sitting there by myself on the brink of despair when I heard his voice.

“Hey.”

My knight in shining armor had appeared. I was so happy—he appeared right when I needed him the most. He was trying his hardest to start a conversation, and all I wanted was to tell him how much I loved him. At the same time, all of those negative feelings came rushing back—why Touka-chan and not me?

“It's too late to go back on your word now, Tomoki-kun! You can't tell me that it's wrong to butt in anymore! And you can't tell me that it's awkward to keep confessing my feelings, no matter how many times I get rejected!”

That's what I ended up shouting after we had a conversation about us; not that he realized it, anyways. I know that my decision was horrible, and that I was a bad person for doing it, but still! His words really clicked with me. I know it was born from a misunderstanding, but still!

“Don't look so down! I've found my answer, after all!”

I don't care if anyone else thinks I'm horrible, including Touka-chan. All of the feelings I've been keeping pent up for years—I'm not giving up on them! I'm tired of trying to act as if they don't exist!

“Good to know,” he answered, looking somewhat weirded out. I love the way he looks: he's so cool and mature, but I know he's a big softie on the inside. It

reminds me of back then.

“Mhm, thanks! Thanks to you, now I feel a whole lot better, Yuu-kun!” I thanked him without a second thought. Yuu-kun quickly realized what I’d just said, though.

“Huh?” he whispered. He looked at me in disbelief, and that’s when I realized I’d screwed up. “...Natsuo?”

He looked puzzled for a while, as if unable to comprehend the fact that I was indeed Natsuo. I knew this was the best opportunity to finally explain everything, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I mean, I’d just talked about how I was in love with an old friend that coincidentally came to see me today with his girlfriend! He would finally piece everything together and realize he was the one I was talking about the entire time! “What should I say?” I kept thinking to myself as I wracked my brain for an excuse.

Yuu-kun, meanwhile, was staring at me eagerly—desperately, even. He was waiting for my answer, but I couldn’t bear to look at him! “I-I have to run away! I can’t do it! I just can’t!” I thought frantically to myself. I ended up running away from him, just like I did all those years ago.

Chapter 14: A Proper Confession

It doesn't look like Kana appreciated what I just said, because after looking troubled for a few seconds, she quickly stands up and bolts off.

"Wait, huh?!" Why'd she run off without saying anything? I figured she'd just try to come up with an excuse or something, but she totally dipped instead. Sigh, whatever. I can't think straight at the moment.

I stand up, grab Hasaki's tennis bag, and chase after her.



Damn you, Hasaki—why do you have to be an athlete? You're so frickin' fast. I'm chasing her with everything I've got, but it's an uphill battle. I'm slowly managing to catch up to her, allowing me to catch glimpses of her face. For some reason, she looks afraid. Fortunately, I'm closing in on her, so it won't be long 'til

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Hey, kid, are you stalking her?!"

"Stop right there, criminal scum!"

A bunch of older guys in jerseys have spotted me chasing after her, and they start shouting at me. From what I can tell, they're a bunch of tennis coaches and some teachers from my school. Given how scared Hasaki looks, for whatever reason, I guess I can understand why they'd assume that I'm harassing her. I can't really put on the breaks right now, though, no matter what they're shouting at me. Screw them; I have to keep going after her.

"I'm her friend!" I shout back at them as I pass by.

"Yeah, sure! Like that's going to fool me!"

“You look like you just came from the bad part of town! No way you’re her ‘friend!’”

They all yell at me again, but with more conviction. With a menacing aura, they start to approach me to block me off. I’m screwed. On one hand, I want to ignore them and continue after Hasaki, but these frickin’ idiots’ll assume I’m hell-bent on harming her or some shit. Okay, maybe I went a little too far there. I know they’re just genuinely concerned about her. Shit shit shit! This isn’t gonna be easy!

“He... He’s my friend!”

As unbelievable as it sounds, Hasaki comes to my rescue right as I’m about to shove them aside. The adults seem completely confused, and they stare blankly at the two of us.

“It’s true. It was just a prank. We’re sorry about all this,” she says while bowing her head apologetically.

“Well, if that’s the case...” one of them says in a slightly-offended tone. The adults look at each other and start to back off. Once they’re a reasonable distance away, I turn to Hasaki and say, “Thanks—you’re a real lifesaver.”

“Please don’t thank me. It was my fault for running away in the first place, after all,” she answers gloomily.

“I guess you’re right.”

“Ugh...,” she whispers as she averts her gaze to the ground. “You’re actually pretty fast, Tomoki-kun. And here I thought I was pretty good at running, but you managed to keep up with me even while carrying my tennis bag.”

“Natsuo,” I quickly cut her off. She jumps a bit at my voice. Yeah, that’s it—the final proof.

She has to be him; case closed. “So you really are Natsuo, Hasaki,” I say. She was my first friend. The more I think about it, the more I realize there’s no mistaking it. They both match up: a fair complexion, hazelnut colored hair, and the same exact expression when they cry.

Hasaki starts to fiddle with her skirt. After a stretch of silence, she lifts her

head, looks straight at me, and says, “I’m sorry. I won’t run away anymore. I’ll tell you the truth. Let’s go find a quiet place so we can talk.”

I nod and follow her lead.



We distance ourselves from the tennis courts and end up in a secluded section of the park with an empty bench available. Once we sit down, Hasaki begins with a smile, “Well... as I’m sure you already know by now, I was Natsuo. It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Yuu-kun?”

It really has been. Looking at her brings back a flood of memories. “Yep. It’s been a while, Natsuo,” I reply.

She blushes and meekly says, “Um, do you mind using my last name like you usually do? It feels so embarrassing when you call me Natsuo. I... I’m not him anymore.”

“Yeah, no worries. I prefer calling you Hasaki, as well. Calling you Natsuo just feels... strange.”

She nods, but doesn’t follow up with anything. We both fall silent for a while. Finally, she breaks the silence by saying, “...Aren’t you gonna ask me anything?”

“Like what?”

“You know... like, anything?”

“Uhh, I mean, if anything’s okay... Sorry, I’m really confused right now. My mind’s taking a lot longer to process things,” I mumble. I mean, realizing that Natsuo has been a girl this whole time is quite the shock. And to top it all off, she’s been my classmate for almost two years now. This isn’t clicking with me at all, actually. Well, one thing’s for sure—I’m surprised, but far from disappointed. I’ve been wanting to see my friend again for years now.

“You don’t seem confused,” she replies.

“I’m not exactly an black-belt at expressing myself, you know,” I say rather

bluntly.

She giggles a little bit, but then her good mood evaporates. She gloomily says, “I see. To be honest, There’s something I really need to tell you... I’ve been thinking about it for a long time now. I’m sorry. Everyone’s scared of you because of me. I never told you the truth, and I never even helped you. I... I’m really sorry.” She bows her head to apologize. Her voice trembles near the end, as do her shoulders.

“You mean because of my scar?” I ask.

She nods, and I let out an audibly-exasperated sigh. Confused, she raises her head and blurts out, “Huh?”

“I don’t think everyone’s only afraid of me because of my scar. I mean, yeah, it adds fuel to the fire, but it’s not the only thing. Plus, it’s not your fault, either. I can understand why you didn’t want to talk to me after that,” I say. It’s really hard to come out to your friends about things you’ve been keeping deep down, like your real gender. I don’t think most people could ever muster the courage. And the fact that she’s doing it now makes me realize how strong she is. So yeah—when I put myself in her shoes, I can’t really be mad at her.

“But—” she mutters, as if unable to accept my words. Before she can continue, though, I cut her off with my own tirade.

“Look, I’ll admit it—the scar doesn’t help with my reputation. But I said it years ago, and I’ll say it again: it’s proof that I protected my friend, so I’m actually proud of it. I don’t hate it or anything like that. So please don’t apologize about it.”

She now looks at me with tear-filled eyes. Looks like some things never change. She’s still the same crybaby as she used to be. Her cheeks flush an intense red. She nods to herself and whispers, “I can’t ignore how I feel, after all...”

What does she mean? I wish I knew, but I’m not gonna prod right now. In any case, this explains a good deal, like the depressed look she had whenever I mentioned my childhood friend. Even before I brought up his name, she probably knew I was talking about her, but didn’t have the courage to tell me. I’d

be lying if I said seeing her like this doesn't bring back painful memories for me, too.

"Haven't you realized that all I've ever done is lie to you?" she suddenly asks while looking at me seriously.

"You have?"

She nods and continues, "The first lie was when I told you I was a boy instead of a girl. The second was when I promised you that we'd see each other after that summer break. And the third was when I told you I wanted to become your friend behind the gym."

"Huh?! Wait, you lied when you said you wanted to be my friend?! ...Oh, wait, yeah. I guess we were already friends in the past, so you could consider that a lie," I say. I think back to that day—thanks to that letter she sent me telling me to meet her behind the gym, we started talking again.

She shakes her head at my response and says, "No, that's not it. I'm going to tell you something, and this time, I'm going to be 100% serious about it." She stares straight into my eyes and declares, "I want to be more than that, more than just friends."

"...Wait, what?"

No way I heard that right. There must be some mistake.

She looks more serious than I've ever seen her before. She continues, "You're the nicest guy I've ever met. You've always been at my side whenever I needed someone. I love you; I truly do." She pauses to collect herself and flashes me a beautifully-dazzling smile. "Make me your girlfriend, Yuu-kun!"

Chapter 15: Yuuji's Answer

Hasaki stands perfectly still, looking expectantly at me as she awaits my reply. For my part, I haven't said anything. I mean, she just confessed to me; you can understand why I feel a little shocked right now. I can't come up with anything.

"I know I've put you on the spot and all, and I'm sorry, but... I'm serious; I don't care if you're already dating Touka-chan. That's how serious I am," she suddenly says while looking me in the eyes.

I'm incredibly flustered right now. Before I give her a concrete answer, I need to ask her something important. "Uh, I'm shocked. I mean, I always thought you had a thing for Ike, so..."

"You don't believe me?" she asks.

"It's not that; it's just..." I hesitate. Before I can continue, however, one of her fingers is on my mouth, and her soft lips are brushing against my cheek. I can feel her warm breath and smell her sweet scent. After a second, she takes a step back and looks me straight in the eyes again.

"If you still don't believe me, next time, I'll be sure to give you a proper kiss."

"No need. I believe you—I don't think you'd go that far if you were lying. Sorry about what I said before. That was bad taste on my part," I say with a small nod.

Her face instantly reddens upon me saying that, and she immediately buries her face into my chest.

"It's fine; don't worry about it. I know my confession came out of nowhere, so of course it caught you off-guard," she says while leaning herself into my chest and hiding her face.

"...And what are you doing now?"

"I don't want you to look at me. I'm sure I look like a giant tomato right now."

Guess she's as embarrassed as I am. Maybe she shouldn't have kissed me, then. I mean, weren't there other ways she could've "proven" her love?

"Now that I think about it, though, you do have this side to you, as well," I say as I scratch my cheek. She sure has some guts to kiss a guy who already has a girlfriend, I'll give her that.

"I surprised myself, too... Actually, let me rephrase that—I figured since I'm already going all in, I might as well, you know?" she replies as she peels herself from me. She's still looking away and covering her face with one of her hands. She must still be quite sheepish, although a little less so than before. She looks really charming when she does that. I mean, she's really cute in general—why's she even going for a guy like me in the first place again?

"Uhhh, and since when have you felt this way?" I ask. She finally stops averting her eyes and looks back at me. She takes a step forward, reaches out to my face with one of her hands, and gently caresses my scar. "Ever since you protected me from those bullies that day. That's when I fell in love with you," she says.

"...I see," I reply. Back in the day, I was a lot "cooler" and showier than I am now, so I guess I can see why she'd fall for that version of me. But we were just kids—you mean to tell me she's had a crush on me ever since? That's such a long time.

"Actually, I realize now that I must've hurt you in more ways than I can count," I say. When we've been able to talk, a lot of the conversation has been either about Touka or our "relationship." That must've sucked ass. Ugh, that was shitty of me—I bet I really hurt her.

"I can't consider that to be your fault, since I was the one who couldn't confess my feelings. Still, I did end up confessing, right? So I'd like a genuine answer."

I nod in agreement—it would be a disservice if I didn't do that for her. Whenever I think about Hasaki, Touka ends up coming to mind instead. Like, what would she think of this confession? I genuinely believe she wishes the best for Kana and for me, too... in her own unique way, at least. I think she'd have her own way of showing her happiness. I remember her asking me once, "Could you please keep pretending to be my boyfriend? Until you're fed up with it, that is." I guess she meant that we should continue our little charade until we find the

one we truly love. At least, I'm pretty sure that's what she was implying. Now, she's not a saint or anything—far from it, even—but she can have a good heart when she puts her mind into it. That's why I'm sure that if I accept Hasaki's confession right now, Touka would be happy for us, just like when I became friends with Asakura. Then again, I also remember her countless warnings about not hitting on other girls, but I'm sure that's more out of concern for me than anything else.

In any case, I guess she's not the really important factor here. My feelings should also play a part in my decision. I think that Natsuo/Hasaki is—even now—a very good friend of mine. I wouldn't complain if we could be friends again like we were back in the day. So with that in mind, I face her and say, "I'm very happy that you told me your true feelings. Thank you, Hasaki. But... I'm sorry. I can't go out with you."

That's my answer, and I've decided to stick with it. This may end up hurting her, but I've made up my mind. There's no going back now.

"...I thought you'd say no. You and Touka-chan are just made for each other. Being rejected does suck, though," she says dejectedly. Her shoulders droop, and her smile vanishes. I wish I could say something else right now, to be honest. She continues, "Um, could you tell me the reason why?"

Well, there are two reasons. "Honestly... I never saw you like that. I really like you and appreciate you as a friend and all, but as for seeing you as a romantic interest... I can't really picture it, no. I don't think it would be honest to myself or fair to you if I accepted despite not feeling anything toward you," I answer. I can't mention the second reason—Touka and I have a very interesting dynamic going on at the moment, and I really want to see where that leads. I just don't want what we have right now to be over.

Hasaki's eyes widen, and she exclaims, "I see. I thought for sure that you'd tell me something like, 'I love Touka so much that I couldn't possibly,' but the way you phrased it actually gives me a little ray of hope... like there's still a teensy, tiny opening for me."

"An opening?" I blurt out. I mean, if—hypothetically, obviously—Touka and I "break up," and my feelings towards Hasaki have changed in the meantime, then

sure; in that case, I'd definitely say yes. So maybe there is an opening, after all. In the end, I chose to persist with my fake relationship with Touka instead of having a real one with Hasaki, but I don't regret my decision.

She takes a deep breath and cheerfully says, "Yuu-kun... I mean, Yuuji-kun. Could we start as friends and see how things go from there?"

"Yeah, of course we can... Hasaki," I answer as I extend my hand out. She doesn't grab it, though, which is a little awkward. What am I supposed to do? She's left me hanging like this.

"Could you call me Kana?" she suddenly asks.

"Huh?"

"You keep calling me by my last name, Yuuji-kun. If we're gonna be friends, it would be weird to do that, right?"

Oh, so that's why she didn't return my gesture. Yeah, I'd rather do that instead of calling her Hasaki or even Natsuo.

"Okay, then lemme try again—I hope we can get along, Kana."

"Mhm. Same here, Yuuji-kun," she answers, this time with a radiant smile. "Actually, I have one more request," she says while grabbing my hand. "You'd better brace yourself for what's to come!"

Huh? What the hell?

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"That'll be my little secret," she giggles.

Chapter 16: Declaration of War

It's the day after her confession. I'm on my way to school, appreciating the scenery around me as I mull things over.

"Ugh, it's Tomoki."

"Is it just me, or does he look especially ticked off today?"

"Don't make eye contact if you value your life."

Everyone who passes by is talking shit, as usual, but they quickly speed up to avoid my presence. This is my day-to-day, so I can't say I'm not used to it, but it still kinda sucks either way. It stings to see people react like I'm out for blood today just because I happen to have some stuff on my mind. Like, man—am I even allowed to seriously ponder about something without having everyone around me act as if I'm walking around with a knife in my hand? Sigh. Whatever. They're all gone now, so I can finally have some peace and quiet.

Man, I sure got myself into a sticky situation. Who would've thought that Kana and Natsuo were the same person all along? And to top it all off, that childhood friend of mine even confessed to me yesterday. Although I rejected her, I do feel sorry for her. I chose a fake relationship with Touka over her real feelings. Kana faced me head-on and told me the truth, and yet I couldn't reciprocate that affection. So yeah, I feel guilty as hell for turning her down.

"Good morning, Senpai!" Touka exclaims as she suddenly appears behind me, promptly interrupting my train of thought. She quickly catches up and positions herself at my side.

"Hey, mornin'," I reply.

"The weather's super nice today! Don't you think so? ...Wow—you look, like, a million times more menacing than usual, Senpai. Something happen?" she asks.

Jeez, even Touka thinks I look scarier when I'm trying to be serious about something. At least she just doesn't bolt out of here like the rest of them. That's

some consolation.

Seeing her look so worried has made me realize something: ever since we started “dating,” I haven’t really thought of the possibility of being with someone else. Like I said before, I really like the current dynamic we’ve got going on. That’s the main reason why I rejected Kana in the first place. I don’t regret putting our “relationship” over the possibility of having one with Kana.

“Just thinking about stuff,” I mumble.

“About Natsuo-kun?”

I’m surprised by her question, but she did know about Natsuo’s real identity before I did. She probably didn’t buy my “restroom” excuse at all and guessed where I really went yesterday.

“Yeah, actually,” I answer.

“Did you manage to meet with him?”

“I did.”

“Were you surprised?” she asks with a smile.

“Mhm.”

“And happy?”

“Yep... Thanks, Touka.”

I have my suspicions that Touka was probably the one who pushed her to tell me the truth, so that’s why I’m thanking her.

“For what?” she asks, not catching on to my meaning.

“It’s okay; forget about it.”

This is where she’d normally say there’s no need to thank her, but she’s feigned ignorance instead. Clearly she cares about others in her own special little way. Well, I guess I’ll just drop the subject.

“Hey there!”

We hear a cheerful greeting ring out from behind us. When we turn around, we see Kana waving a hand at us.

“Good morning!” Touka follows with a cheerful smile.

“Hey, ‘sup.”

Seeing her face reminds me of what happened yesterday. I’m sorta embarrassed now, to be honest. I gotta keep calm—we’re just friends. We promised each other that’s where we’d start from.

Kana catches up and starts walking beside us. “Thanks for coming to cheer me on yesterday, by the way! You’re looking nice today, too, Yuuji-kun!” she cheerfully exclaims. Suddenly, she grabs one of my arms and locks hers in mine.

“Huh?!” “What the—?!” Touka and I shout at the same time, equally dumbfounded by her actions.

“What are you even doing, Kana?” I finally manage to ask.



“I’m just deepening the bonds of our friendship!” she quickly replies, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Is that how guys and girls boost their friendships? I mean, Kana sounds quite convinced about it, so maybe she’s right? Let’s see what Touka thinks.

“...‘Yuuji-kun?’ ‘Kana?’” she says, her voice as cold as ice.

“Yup. We decided to call each other by our names yesterday. Right, Yuuji-kun?” Kana announces proudly, totally dismissing Touka’s frigid aura.

“Y-Yeah, that’s right.”

“What?! Why would you do that?! Didn’t you just meet up with Natsuo...?!”

Okay, I better explain it to her before things spiral out of contro—

“Hasn’t he told you yet, Touka-chan? I confessed my feelings for him yesterday,” Kana suddenly states.

“Wh-What...?” Touka sputters. She looks like she’s in complete shock right now.

“He rejected me, though,” she follows up as Touka starts glaring daggers at me.

“O-Oh, right. Obviously he did! He already has me, so of course he said no. Right. Right...? Hey, wait a sec! You know we’re a couple, so why would you even confess to him in the first place!? You little...! God, I can’t believe this! Can you just, like, get away from him already?!” she shouts in a fit of rage as she tries to physically separate us.

Kana doesn’t give in, though. Her expression sours, and she whispers, “He may have said no, but he told me to keep at it. Well, it was before I confessed to him... Anyway, that means that he’s okay with me doing this sort of thing.”

“Huh?! Senpai would never say anything like that. If you’re gonna try to bullshit your way outta this, at least try and learn how to lie better. Right,

Senpai?!” she exclaims as she turns towards me.

I nod. Yep, I rejected Kana’s confession. That much is definitely true. “Mhm, you’re right about tha—Hold on!” My previous words of advice hit me too late. I realize that I totally egged her on before I got her confession. That’s when I thought she was talking about Ike, though. Shit.

“Huh? What’s with that reaction? You mean you actually told her that? No way you told her she could be the side chick or that you wanted to keep your options open... right, Senpai?” she asks gloomily.

Why did I have to be such a dumbass?! Why?!

“I, uh, may have said something along those lines, yeah,” I stammer.

“Wh-Whaaat?!” she yelps. She looks like she’s about to cry on the spot.

I should just be straight with her here. Honesty is the best policy, after all. I’ll tell her exactly what happened; that way, she won’t be mad at m—

“Exactly, there you go! That’s why this isn’t gonna stop ’til he likes me!” Kana suddenly cuts in as I try to explain myself. She pushes herself up against my arm even harder for emphasis.

“Huh? The hell are you talking about?” Touka says.

“I’m going to keep doing stuff like this until Yuuji-kun accepts my feelings,” she explains with a grin. “I never thought of a way for us to make up after that fight we had in elementary school. Now that we’re competing for the same guy, we’ll definitely get along better!”

“Would you just get away from him already?!” she screams at the other girl.

“Um, no thanks. I’m not gonna hold back here, Touka-chan. I never do! I don’t wanna lose against you! That’s why, Touka-chan...” she trails off for added effect. She winks, places both of her hands together, and continues, “I’m sorry in advance for stealing your boyfriend.”

Touka remains silent, glaring bloody murder at Kana.

“Kana, I don’t think you really got what I said back there!” I hesitantly jump in. I have to avoid the impending doom!

“I heard what I heard, Yuuji-kun! You complimented me, and you also told me to never give up! I told you, remember? I don’t buy your excuses at this point!” she retorts.

Ugh, that feels like a slap to the face. I can’t retort with anything. She’s got me cornered, and I’ll just end up trying to come up with some lame excuse to avoid disaster. I get what I deserve.

She looks me in the eyes as I desperately try to think of something else. She blushes when our eyes meet, but she doesn’t back down. She proudly exclaims with a smile, “That’s how it’s going to be! You two better brace yourselves for what’s coming!”

Her smile makes my heart skip a beat, although it’s completely unwillingly.

Epilogue: Touka joins the fight!

Oh my frickin' god! What the hell's been going on lately?! I've never been so pissed in my entire life. It's all because of that bitch, Hasaki-senpai. She was totally drooling all over Yuuji-senpai this morning!

I told her to tell him the truth about Natsuo because I figured he needed to meet "him" again, but I never expected her to throw in a confession of all things!

Then again, I guess I can't be too surprised. Whenever we all hung out together, she would always look incredibly down. I gave her a little push to be honest with herself and with Senpai 'cause she'd been lying to him for years, but how dare she confess her feelings for him! She knows damn well that he's already with me!

"Touka looks upset today."

"Didn't you hear? Her thug of a boyfriend is apparently two-timing her. You know that girl with the big tits in his class that plays tennis? Yeah, her."

"Whoa, seriously?! No wonder she's so pissed off."

"I feel so bad for her right now..."

Everyone's gossiping and spreading lies about us, as always. Normally I'd have ammo locked and loaded, ready to counter their stupid arguments, but I can't be bothered today. I can't pretend that I'm not absolutely livid. No one's approaching me today because of it.

"Hey, Touka. You look pretty down. You good?"

Oh, scratch that—I guess there is someone with enough balls to come talk to me. Ugh... Of all people, why does it have to be this freak psychopath? The

psychopath in question is Kai Rekka. For some reason, he's smiling. I guess he's trying to cheer me up.

"I can't imagine Tomoki-senpai ever doing that. Even if there is a little truth to it, I'm sure there's a good reason behind it anyway. I get why you feel down in the dumps right now, but I also know that you understand him better than anyone. Right?"

The hell's up with this guy? Doesn't he realize that his face is the last thing I wanna look at right now? And why the fuck is he blushing? Like, does he think he has a shot to score with Senpai now that Hasaki's trying to win him over? Nah, that can't be it. At least he's trying to console me. Even though I still haven't forgiven him for what he did to Senpai, I'm thankful he's putting in the effort.

"Mhm. Thanks, Kai-kun," I say.

"Don't sweat it," he answers with a smile. "And since Hasaki-senpai is fighting for him now, that means I have a chance with him, as well," he adds with a whisper as his cheeks redden. Man, he looks like one of those blushing, squealing girls you see in TV soaps.

Okay, forget what I said—he's beyond redemption, after all. I will never, EVER forgive him.



It's lunch break, so I rush to Senpai's classroom as soon as my class ends. I want to see him right away! A lunch break without talking to him is an incomplete one.

I slam his class's door open, like always, and eagerly exclaim, "Senpai, let's have lunch toge—"

"Yuuji-kuuun! I made you a lunch box today! Wanna have lunch together?" Hasaki-senpai jumps in and cuts me off.

"Wait, you made one for me, too?" Yuuji-senpai says.

“Yeah! Here, it’s all yours!” she happily says. She locks one of her arms around his and uses the other to fish two small lunch boxes from her bag. You little skank... And the worst part is that he looks happy that she made him lunch! Ugh! Whatever, I’m going in, too. Screw you, Hasaki-senpai.

“Um, Hasaki-senpai? Could you quit it with the pathetic passes at my boyfriend, please? We already had plans to eat together, y’know?”

She shakes her head, shrugs slightly, and gives me the most infuriating sneer. “Oh... Hey there, Touka-chan! How ’bout we all eat together, then? The more the merrier! You can try some of the food I made, too—I bet you’ll love it!”

“Hell no.”

“Eek, scawyyy!” she shouts as she pushes her chest further into Senpai’s arm. The fact that he’s not even reacting to it pisses me off even more.

“Shit, it’s Ike’s sister.”

“This feels like a real standoff, man.”

“And Ike’s not even here to witness it. Man, he leaves at the worst possible times sometimes.”

Everyone’s looking at us and gossiping, so I glare at them. They quickly shut their traps and look away; some of the boys are even whistling to feign innocence, as if they’re not part of the issue right now. Senpai’s classmates are way too theatrical for my taste. I’m downright fuming now.

“Sorry, Kana, but I’ll have to pass on the offer for today. And could you also unglue yourself from me, please?” he finally says.

“Whaaat?” she says with a pout. Thankfully, the moment Senpai gives her his serious look, she immediately removes herself from him.

“...Okay, I guess that’s a no. But I still made this lunch for you, so could you at least eat it today? I wouldn’t want it to go to waste,” she asks while fidgeting.

Senpai nods and accepts the box. “Yeah, I’d be more than happy to.”

“Ehehe! Give me your thoughts on it later, okay?” she chirps with a stupid smile on her face.

“Sure. Anyway, let’s get going, Touka,” he says as he looks at me. I can definitely tell just from looking at his face that he’s trying to apologize to me without saying anything. At the moment, I’d love nothing more than to just let loose on him and everyone else in here, but I settle for a classic death glare instead.



“It’s been a while since I’ve felt that awkward,” Senpai says with a deep breath. We’re at our usual spot on the roof. I’ve even spread the cloth for us to sit on and everything.

“It’s ’cause of what you told Hasaki-senpai that day. Y’know, about not giving up and all? Maybe if you hadn’t, this wouldn’t be happening,” I retort.

“...You got me there. I’m sorry about that.”

“I don’t think you should’ve accepted her lunch box either, to be honest.”

He opens the lunch box and replies, “I mean, she took the time to make this for me. How could I have refused it?”

“But now that you’ve accepted it, she’ll just keep making more whenever she can! That isn’t exactly much better, is it?!”

“Yeah, that would definitely be a problem. But I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t like having another person make these for me,” he replies in a gentle voice and a forced smile.

Ugh, that felt like a stab to the chest.

“Damn!” he suddenly shouts as he peers inside the box. Huh? What’d she stuff in there? Lemme check.

“Whoa...” I blurt out unconsciously. There’s a bed of white rice and pink-coloured tempura arranged on top of it in the shape of a heart. There’s some other stuff as well, but it’s not really worth mentioning. Aren’t they supposed to be “just friends?” I would definitely cringe if my girlfriend gave this to me, much

less a friend. Hey, wait—is Senpai just picking up his chopsticks like it's no big deal?

“Anyway, time to dig in,” he announces. He starts with a small handmade patty, which he happily chows down on. As he eagerly continues to rummage through the box, I can't help but ask, “...Is it tasty?”

“Yeah, it's really good,” he replies.

“How would it compare to mine?”

“Both are good. Honestly, they're hard to compare,” he says lamely, trying to dodge the question with a total non-answer.

I know it's weird for me to ask, and it'll put him on the spot, but I really wanna know which one he thinks is better. He sees me conflicted and speaks up. “Do you remember how you told me a while back that we'd continue this relationship until one of us got tired of it?”

My chest feels like lead right now. I knew this conversation would come up eventually.

“I'm invested in our relationship right now. Back when she confessed, the first thing that came to mind was how I didn't want our ‘relationship’ to end just yet. I don't regret my decision, but thinking about it again made me recall something else,” he continues rather seriously.

“And what's that?” I ask. I really don't want to hear it, but I know I have to.

“I came to the realisation that if I ever really fell in love with someone, I'd instantly end this relationship. I don't even know if I'm capable of feeling any serious affection toward someone else in the first place, but if it ever happens, I'd definitely let you know.”

I'm happy that he cares so much about our relationship. But in the end, I'm nothing more than a junior that he simply cares about as a friend. That really, truly hurts.

“Is that why you told her to keep trying back then?” I ask.

“So I know you're gonna call bullshit and say it's a lame excuse, but I gave her that advice thinking that she was talking about Ike the whole time, not me. But

she figured that advice applied to me, too. That's why all this is happening," he explains seriously.

Huh, he seems sincere and pretty unhappy. Sigh, I'm just the worst, aren't I? I shouldn't be furious at him for this; I know I shouldn't. All I've been doing is obsessing over my point of view of the situation. I was so wrapped up in thinking that he didn't "like" me anymore that I never bothered putting myself in his shoes. It was wrong of me to vent my frustration on him.

"I get it, okay? I know you would never do something like that on purpose. It was rude of me to say that. Sorry," I apologize.

"Don't worry... and thanks," he says with a smile.

He doesn't need to worry about the confession thing, really. I mean, it's not like he could've predicted her to be in love with him of all people. Maybe if we were in an actual relationship—or if this'd never happened in the first place—he could've had a normal friendship with Hasaki-senpai. Instead, we're stuck in... whatever this situation is, and he feels super guilty because of it.

I'm aware of this, but I still don't want him to even consider the idea. I want us to be together for real, for him to love me and only me! I don't want to give him to any girl in the whole wide world! Okay, I guess it's come down to this—I'll just tell him what I really feel.

"Um, Senpai!" I start. I have to tell him the truth so he doesn't suffer anymore.

"Hm? What's up?"

It's simple. I just have to say the magic words: "I really love you, Senpai. Would you like to go out with me for real?"

"I-I...!" I stammer. I have to say it, but the words don't come out! If I tell him the truth—that I've been lying about my real feelings, and that I'd pressured him to date me for my own convenience, like Hasaki-senpai—then he might end up hating me. I'm so scared; I don't want that. Finally, I manage to say, "I don't have any plans to find a boyfriend other than you, Senpai." Okay, so I didn't tell him flat out that I like him, but I think this does the job just fine, right?

"Really? So you feel the same as I do about us right now? Nice, that makes me happy," he says in a timid manner as he scratches one of his cheeks.

Ugh, he didn't get it at all. I blame it on him being such a social outcast for so long; he just never learned how to read between the lines. I'll have to be more direct with him, like Hasaki-senpai was!

"...Dumbass," I whisper. Oh good, he didn't hear me. He would've thought I was getting angry at him again, when it was really directed at myself.

Up until now, all I've wanted is for others to accept me for who I am. Not as Ike Haruma's sister, but as Ike Touka. I've been going through hell for years because of it. I've never been scared of speaking what's on my mind to others, but this time, I'm too afraid to do it. I want Senpai to see me in a positive light, y'know? For him to think that I'm a cute, pleasant girl. A girl worthy of his love. I hate myself. I hate myself, because all I've been doing so far is thinking about me. Me, me, me. She's better than me, she's braver than me for confessing, and so on.

As I sip my coffee, I glance over at Senpai. Whenever I think about him, my chest feels heavy, and pain starts to fill my body. I love him. I don't want anyone else to have him. I want us to be together forever. Even so, I'm still frickin' terrified of disturbing what we have right now. My mind whirls itself into a frenzy when I think about losing it—about losing us—and I just can't control myself.

"I know you wanna say something, Touka. Just say it. You know me," Senpai suddenly says, breaking the silence. Maybe he thinks I'm angry at him. I wouldn't blame him—I mean, I probably look like I'm about to commit a double homicide.

I steel myself and stand up. "I've made my decision," I say as I look him directly in the eyes. "I'll make you fall in love with me!"

"...Huh? What're you talking about?" he asks, a puzzled look on his face. Well, his confusion makes sense. Anyone would be weirded out if they were told that completely out of the blue. I can't just stand here and do nothing, though. I need to stand up for myself against the skanks. I've seen the light. I know I love him, so I'll join the battle for his heart!

"Didn't I just tell you that I don't want anyone but you as my boyfriend, Senpai?!"

“Yeah, you did. What about it?”

“If I want my school life to be fulfilling, you need to enter the equation as my real boyfriend. There’s no other way!” I tell him.

“I guess that’s the best way to make sure no guys ever approach you, since everyone loathes my ass,” he says with a dim expression.

I know it’s wrong of me to not confess my feelings outright, but I don’t want him to think that no one could ever develop feelings for him either. That’s a complete and utter lie. He’s the nicest, most reliable, and coolest guy I’ve ever met!

“I won’t give you to Hasaki-senpai! I want you to be my boyfriend forever and ever!” I declare. I know that’ll only confuse him more, since I’m technically not saying that I love him, but...

After a short pause, he asks in a surprised voice, “So you’re basically saying that you’ll enjoy the rest of your time at school if we end up going official? And you’ll do that by making me fall in love with you?”

I nod.

“Then please take it easy on me,” he adds with a light smile.

I point my finger at him and proudly exclaim, “No way—I’m going all out! I ain’t pulling any punches! You better brace yourself, Senpai!”

I’ll tell him my true feelings one day; I promise. But until that moment arrives, you better not fall in love with another girl, Senpai. I’m gonna fight for your love. You hear that, Hasaki-senpai? This is goddamn war!

Afterword

Sekaiichi here. To those who've gotten their hands on the second volume of *There's no way a side character like me could be popular, right?*, I salute you!

I uploaded this novel chapter by chapter on "Shousetsuka ni Narou" before it became official. I know I mentioned this in my previous afterword, but I'd like to thank my fans again. Without your support, this wouldn't have been possible.

If you haven't read the "Narou" version, you can always check out my profile; I've actually uploaded those and a good amount of other stories on my profile. I invite you to check those out, as well! #shamelessadvertising In any case, we've managed to get the second volume out, and that's pretty awesome! In this volume, we've seen a certain girl insert herself as part of the main cast thanks to a sudden surge of courage. She was able to do the unthinkable! What did you think of Kana's development in this volume? Did you like it? Nothing would make me happier if you did.

It's also important to mention that I got tons of fan letters from people who bought the first volume! To everyone who did, please know that these letters make my day whenever I'm feeling down. Thank you so much! I promise that I'll keep doing my best!

Since many of you have asked where you can send your letters to, I'll let you know. You can ask me about anything, you know. Love advice? Life advice? A way to get senpai—that's me—to notice you? My thoughts on the latest Jump issue? How many five-yen coins you could take out with the money in my bank account? You got it! Anything goes!

Here's the PO box:

〒141-0031

東京都品川区西五反田7-9-5

SGテラス5階

(〒141-0031

Tokyo, Shinagawa ku, Nishigotanda 7-9-5, SG Terrace, 5th floor).

Seriously, I really appreciate the letters.

You should see my head editor at Overlap. I definitely need his support, as well, because sometimes I'm such a downer. Good thing he's there for me. Ahem, anyway... Sorry about that. I just needed to get that off my chest.

I really want to thank my manager for all the advice and support he's given me. I'm sorry for all the trouble I cause you. Heavy sweating. I know I'm going to keep being a pain in the ass, so here's to our future.

I want to thank Tomari-sensei for making the illustrations for this book, too! Kana looks as lovely as ever on the cover. I absolutely loved seeing Asakura take form in one of the colored images! It looks like she also went out of her way to draw Makiri-sensei, Kana and Touka in tennis gear, complete with those super-short skirts that Yuuji—and I—love so much! It may not be in the main story, but I love it nonetheless! I actually personally asked for Makiri-sensei to be in that picture, as well, so that explains why she's there. My apologies, Tomari-sensei. I'm sorry for imposing on you, even though you're such a busy person. In any case, I want to thank her for all the work she's done so far!

As always, I also want to thank the designing team, the marketing team, the bookstore people, and everyone else involved in the process of making this book! It came out amazing, and I'm really pleased with it! Thank you!

I'd also like to personally thank you once more for your continued support. Really, thank you all! I'm so happy that you bought this second volume. Seriously, you can't even imagine how happy I am. Hopefully you find my work interesting and enjoyable. I'll make sure to keep working hard!

I hope to see you in the next volume, as well!

Sekaiichi.

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